Optimal Size For Online Asynchronous Text-Based Focus Group Discussions: A Mixed Methods Study

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children: Charlie, Anya, Scout, and Bryn, who are my greatest accomplishments. You are proof that love and learning exist without boundaries.

Abstract

For over six decades, focus group discussions have been a popular and effective methodology for qualitative researchers. Focus group interviewing is a specific type of post-positivistic qualitative research that uses groups of people and a set of predetermined questions directed to a specific conversation to elicit valuable data. Traditional focus groups are conducted face-to-face with participants and moderator all at the same venue. In the past 20 years, Internet technologies have given rise to online focus group discussions. However, as the method of conducting online focus groups has increased, scant research exists in the literature wherein optimal practices are examined in an effort to work toward a standardized form of the approach. This mixed methods dissertation study advances the field of online qualitative research toward a clearer understanding of the online asynchronous focus group methodology in answering the key research question: What is the optimal size for online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions? Using a comparison of online focus groups conducted in an evaluation of a PK-12 educator professional development workshop, it examines the yield differences of group size for six variables of interest: depth of discussion, breadth of discussion, retention rates, participant interaction, adherence to topic, and disclosure of sensitive information. Additionally, comparable qualitative data were analyzed in two areas: participant reactions and researcher/moderator notes. A total of eight online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions were conducted in the evaluation, each with the researcher as moderator and each normalized with the same questions, moderator interaction, and length of time. Three focus groups were classified as small (4-

6 participants), three as medium (10-13 participants), and two as large (17 participants). In total, 84 educators (teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and support staff) completed the four days of online discussion, answering questions about the workshop they attended. In addition, participants responded to a discussion question regarding experiences in the online focus group and completed a post-discussion survey. Analysis of transcripts, notes, survey results, content, and statistics showed significant differences exist between the three treatment sizes. Medium-sized groups were found to be the most optimal of the treatment groups. While large groups yielded similar content results, the participant feedback and researcher indicated the large treatment was more taxing on them for what resulted in a similar net yield of data. Small groups were lacking in interaction and the depth and breadth of text-based conversation of either of the larger groups. Small group participants and the researcher also noted frustrations of the smaller group.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en
In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

- William Shakespeare
The Taming of the Shrew

Statement of the Problem

Researchers, marketers and advertisers have utilized focus group interviews for over sixty years, and while online technologies have been prevalent for nearly three decades, the practice of conducting *online* focus groups is just now emerging on educational and social science research landscapes (Greenbaum, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Kenny, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Gothberg et al., 2013). Using the Internet for focus groups has enormous potential for qualitative research (Turney & Pocknee, 2005). Online focus groups are emerging as fertile ground for conducting reliable research (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002; Schneider et al., 2002; Turney & Brooks, 2005; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2006; Atkinson et al., 2006; Blomberg et al., 2011). So, while there is a current need for research on the subject and a desire to further the practice, there are few studies addressing the subject. It is this hole in the research, coupled with a movement toward online iterations of data gathering that prompts this study.

Aims and Objectives

The intent of this dissertation study is to determine if the number of participants in text-based online asynchronous focus group discussions significantly affects quality of discussion and the depth of data gathered by researchers. If researchers can better

understand how to optimize size of individual focus groups, research using this method could be more efficient and result in more accurate findings.

Context

Over the past ten to fifteen years, online environments have not only become an attractive option for commerce, marketing, and entertainment, but also for researchers in social sciences. Qualitative researchers in both academic and marketing arenas are drawn to technology-based iterations of their craft, as well, including online spaces. Asynchronous text discussions as a means of gathering data in focus groups have certain benefits for both academic and marketing researchers (cost, combining subjects from wide geographical distances, flexible taxation of time, ease of transcribing notes, etc.). While these benefits attract researchers to the online asynchronous text realm, very little research has been done regarding best practices and optimization of the methodology.

Exegesis: Definitions and Terms

"What is the optimal size for an online asynchronous focus group discussion?" is a title that requires some unpacking. The term *optimal* is central to this study and is the key component to the title. But what elements comprise an "optimal" discussion? This study will look at several factors to determine if a focus group is *optimal*. Since the purpose of the study is to determine *optimal group size*, all other constructs of the treatments will be the same. Number of group participants will receive three treatments, but to determine if one is more *optimal* than another means discussions can be measured. Measurements of the discussions will determine if one is more (higher measures) or less (lower measures) optimal.

Focus groups are a special kind of discussion used in qualitative research. This method of data gathering requires specific design and moderation. Focus group discussions, in their true sense, are guided discussions led by a moderator with the specific purpose of gathering information to answer predetermined research questions carefully laid out in a progression that will deepen reactions and insight (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2009). The term *online* is becoming blurred as mobile and other technologies evolve, however, in this use, *online* refers to Internet-based online ecosystems. Other technology-aided focus group methods have morphed the original look of focus group research (for instance, telephone "conference call" discussions and video conferencing discussions), but this study is decidedly interested in *online* data gathering.

Finally, the term *asynchronous* is paramount to the study's construct. Focus groups conducted online have been done both using synchronous and asynchronous communication. Asynchronous focus groups are focus groups conducted where the communication is not necessarily immediate and do not require the participants be "together" at one particular moment in time. The asynchronous discussions in this study are text-based, meaning the discussions will be typed into an online system to be read by other participants. While other asynchronous discussions could be audio-based or video-based, the asynchronous discussion in this dissertation title refers to a text-based discussion.

Research questions

This dissertation sets out to answer the primary research question:

- What is the optimal size for online asynchronous test-based focus group discussions?

Subsequently, further research questions also emerge:

- Does a small, medium, or large online asynchronous text-based focus group yield greater adherence to the topic being discussed for participants?
- Is there higher participant interaction in small, medium, or large online asynchronous text-based focus group?
- Is disclosure of personal information more prevalent in small, medium, or large online asynchronous text-based focus groups?
- Does depth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as depth of conversation as in the medium group? Does depth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as depth of conversation as in the large group? Does depth of conversation in the medium group yield as high a usage as depth of conversation as in the large group?
- Does breadth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as breadth of conversation as in the medium group? Does breadth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as breadth of conversation as in the large group? Does breadth of conversation in the medium group yield as high a usage as breadth of conversation as in the large group?
- How do survey responses and open-ended focus group question responses with participants help to explain any quantitative differences in discussions between small, medium, and large sized online asynchronous focus group discussions?

Hypotheses

There are three major hypotheses postulated from the author's experience in previous studies utilizing online asynchronous focus groups as well as research related to online asynchronous online learning environments. These hypotheses are:

- The smaller the number of participants in an online asynchronous focus group discussion, the more optimal the group.
- There is a correlation between increased size of the online asynchronous focus group discussions and decreased participant interaction.
- Disclosure of personal information decreases as online asynchronous focus group size increases.
- Depth of conversation increases as group size of an online asynchronous focus group discussion decreases.
- There is no correlation between increased amount of participants in an online asynchronous focus group and breadth of discussion.
- Participant satisfaction is higher in medium-sized online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions than it is in small or large groups.

Exclusions and Delimitations

The scope of this study does not extend to a consideration of various other factors in online asynchronous focus groups (OAFG). These factors include the level of interaction between moderator and participants, variations in online environments, the duration of the focus group, the duration of the group question-reply period, age, gender, other forms of asynchronous online discussion (e.g. video, audio), or number of questions asked.

Also, as discussed in the literature review below, most previous work done in the area of online focus group methodology research is concentrated on comparative studies (online versus face-to-face focus groups); a strand which universally declare focus group discussions online as staying true to the method (with the caveat of some subtle nuances between the two). However, on this occasion, attention is only directed at online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions, and will not, therefore, draw conclusions between face-to-face and online iterations. Additionally, this study does not draw conclusions between asynchronous online focus groups and those versions of the method conducted synchronously (online or other, such as phone or video focus groups). Great care has been taken to make the qualitative analysis of the data systemic and replicable.

In addition, due to lack of resources, qualitative data will not be subject to independent judges or inter-rater reliability techniques.

Limitations

Because of the nature of the qualitative portion of the research study, other researchers and scholars may interpret some of the data gathered differently.

Shape of the dissertation

This paper will be divided into six chapters and an appendix section. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to online asynchronous focus group discussions, a rationale for the study, the rationale for using qualitative and mixed methods research methods, a statement of the problem, research questions, and an explanation of exclusions of the study. Chapter two presents a review of literature, including a look at the history,

techniques, iterations, and studies conducted related to focus groups, online focus groups, and the analysis of data-gathering methodologies. Chapter three describes the research methods, recruitment of subjects, how data will be collected, how data will be analyzed, and what strategies will be used to increase validity and reliability. The fourth chapter presents the findings, including quantitative findings from the MANOVA statistical analysis (derived from survey responses), analysis of open-ended survey questions, and themes derived from an in-depth content analysis of transcripts of discussions. In chapter five, a summary of findings will be presented accompanied by quotes and a description of the how statistical findings can be interpreted in relation to the qualitative data. Finally, the last chapter features a discussion of the results, future implications for research, and the strengths and limitations of this dissertation study. An appendix section will follow the chapters and will include copies of the University of Minnesota internal review board (IRB) approval, informed consent forms, survey questions, and focus group questions.

Conventions

For the sake of simplifying this document, a few conventions will be followed. The term "online asynchronous focus groups" is a rather long term, so it may be referenced in subsequent chapters by the abbreviation OAFG. When necessary, "focus group discussions" will be used interchangeably with the shortened version "focus groups." Further, gender references will be presented in the generic she/he or plural ("they") format so as to avert gender bias in references to participant feedback, quotations or other references.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The ability of the digital world to emulate the real world is advancing and getting more and more subtle.

– Ray Kurzweil

Exponential growth of digital technologies permeates life in the 21st Century. Long gone are the days when work, school, and experiment were exclusively limited to face-to-face and single-space environments. The modifications of society are wide-ranging and deep. Today, Internet and wireless technologies are so encompassing, new paradigms of *learning*, *doing*, and *being* are re-imagined. As with any swell of change, researchers are wont to deeply explore the causes and implications of transformation, and recent studies surrounding online and wireless technologies are widespread. Studying the effects of digital technologies is not the only interest researchers have in the Internet. Many are finding new ways to utilize traditional methods of data gathering in an online format. The research method of survey, for instance, is one example of how quickly a method has become commonplace on the Internet. Qualitative research continues to embrace the Internet as both a subject and for data gathering. While online methods surge in popularity and praxis with social science and marketing researchers, a paucity of studies looking into the actual process and procedure of that utilization exists (Gothberg et al., 2013). Lacking are published investigations into optimal constructs – including those relating to online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions.

In this review of literature, issues surrounding the methodology of online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions are examined. This is accomplished by first looking at long-held and established focus group methods, practices, and procedures

as outlined by leading researchers and practitioners in the field. Next, origins and the historical evolution of focus group discussions will be explored followed by examples of technology-enhanced focus group methods and a look at published comparison studies. In the next section, a review of literature relating to proximate studies in online asynchronous classroom discussions is presented. Common techniques in analyzing efficacy and nuances in discussions – both in-person and online – will then be described. Universal parameters found in various group constructs are the next part of the literature review. This is succeeded by an exploration of analysis methods that have been (or could be) deployed in an effort to determine group efficacy and optimization. The chapter ends with an analysis of educational topics that could be ripe for employment of an online focus group discussion.

Focus group research

Focus group interviewing is a specific type of post-positivistic qualitative research that uses groups of people and a set of predetermined questions directed to a specific conversation to elicit valuable data. "Qualitative research begins with a broad question and often no preidentified concepts. Concepts are identified in and constructed from data" (Corbin & Strauss, p. 21). It is this open-endedness and ability to delve deep into a subject that makes focus group discussions a popular method for those conducting stand-alone or combined-method research. While it is qualitative in nature, the focus group method is quite deliberate and scientific. "Focus group analysis is a deliberate, purposeful process … It is systemic, uses verifiable procedures, is done in a sequential manner and is a continuing process" (Krueger & Casey, p. 128). The methodology has surged in both

commercial and academic research. “Among the most widely used researcher tools in the social sciences are group depth interviews, or focus groups” (Stewart et al., 2007, p. 1).

According to Krueger & Casey (2009), the intent of a focus group is to find the range of descriptive perceptions, feelings, or opinions on a complex topic using systemic procedures for data collection, handling, and analysis (pp. 200-201) and are more transferable than generalizable, focusing on depth of data rather than breadth (203). “The focus group affords researchers the chance to observe transactions between and among participants, how they respond and react to each other … to provide us with data not obtainable through paper and pencil self-report measures or observational measures” (Byers & Wilcox, 1991, p. 64).

Origins and history. Educational focus groups typically mimic techniques and procedures set forth by market researchers (Krueger & Casey, pp. 2-4). With over 80 years of historical context, today’s focus groups are a widely-used qualitative research technique (Frye & Fontana, 1991; Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling, & Vivari, 2002). It is imperative to an understanding of the methodology to look back at the origins and iterations of focus groups. Roots of the current focus group methodology can be traced to the early 1930s as social scientists were looking for new ways to interview subjects. Those early iterations featured one-on-one interviews with leading questions by the interviewer and directed participants toward a desired answer (Krueger & Casey, 2009, pp. 2-3). A more open-ended style emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s. This technique was outlined in publications authored by Columbia University researcher Robert K. Merton after World War II, who had conducted open-ended questions as a

manner of studying morale and effectiveness and outcomes of war propaganda. His seminal article, "The Focused Interview" (1946), was co-authored by Patricia L. Kendall, and outlines a line of questioning employed in marketing and social research focus groups today.

> "During the war, [marketing case study researcher] Dr. [Herta] Herzog and the senior author of the present paper were assigned by several war agencies to study the psychological effects of specific morale-building devices. In the course of this work the focused interview was progressively developed to a relatively standardized form … the primary, though not the exclusive, purpose of the focused interview was to provide some basis for *interpreting* statistically significant effects of mass communications" (Merton & Kendall, p. 542).

In the article, Merton & Kendall (1946) say the line of questioning must elicit open-ended responses from subjects and the delivery should be carefully crafted in a manner he calls an "interview guide" (p. 541). They laid out four keys to successful moderation: 1) Nondirection (minimal guidance and direction); 2) Specificity (she/he should guide subjects to specific examples); 3) Range (of responses); 4) Depth and personal context (the interview should bring out value-laden responses to determine significance). "In the focused interview, then, an unstructured question is one which does not fix attention on any specific aspect of the stimulus situation or of the response; it is, so to speak, a blank page to be filled in by the subject" (Merton & Kendall, p. 545). Additionally, Merton found that subjects would reveal more sensitive information about themselves if they felt they were in a safe environment, the interviewer behaved objectively and listened well to

responses, and for the interview to be conversational in tone. “A bit more about the early phase in the genesis and growth of the focussed [sic] group-interview. For a time, I found myself interviewing groups of soldiers in Army camps about their responses to specific training films and so-called morale films—some of them designed by Frank Capra and other directors of that calibre,” Merton reflected in a speech delivered in 1986 (Merton, 1987). “In the course of that experience … there developed the set of procedures which came to be known as the focussed interview” (Merton, p. 554).

In 1956, Merton, Marjorie Fiske and Kendall published a book on focus interviewing, *The Focused Interview* (which Merton argued should be spelled “focussed”), which more deeply set forth the technique, which was being adopted by both social science and marketing researchers. Eventually, the interview style morphed into group interviews. In 1987 the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* published a transcript of the 1986 speech Merton delivered a year earlier entitled: “How Did We Get from ‘Focussed Interviews’ to Focus Groups’?” in which he claimed to only recently become aware focus groups using his interview techniques were being widely used in marketing research (p. 550). Perhaps this was because Merton was fully entrenched in academic research, shielded from the knowledge of marketers, political parties, and advertisers, who were seemingly exclusively using – and modifying – the technique from the 1950s until the early 1980s. “Even though academics weren’t interested in focus groups, the pragmatic market research community embraced focus groups beginning in the 1950s … the acceptance of focus groups, and of qualitative research methods in general, had been delayed in academic circles for a variety of reasons” (Krueger & Casey, p. 3).

Focus groups in social science research. Then-University of California-Riverside researcher David L. Morgan proposed utilization of marketing focus group techniques and re-envisioning them for social science research (1984), primarily as a component of mixed method triangulation strategies (p. 253). Morgan's framework centered on fostering interaction between group members to garner more organic and real data. Morgan, much as Merton had done forty years earlier, implored researchers (those conducting the interviews) to act as more of a facilitator, guide, and observer.

> "In essence, the strengths of focus groups come from a compromise between the strengths found in other qualitative methods. Like participant observation, they allow access to a process that qualitative researchers are often centrally interested in: interaction. Like in-depth interviewing, they allow access to the content that we are often interested in: the attitudes and experiences of our informants." (Morgan & Spanish, p. 260).

Another book published in 1988 helped accelerate interest in focus groups in social science research—the first edition of University of Minnesota researcher Richard Krueger's widely-cited work: *Focus Groups A Practical Guide for Effective Research*. Now co-authored with Mary Anne Casey, Krueger's treatise on focus group praxis is in its fifth edition in 2014. Morgan and Krueger teamed up to write a chapter in the 1993 book *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art* in which they describe the increasing interest in the methodology. "Social science and evaluation research are still at a stage at which most of our knowledge about focus groups comes from personal experience rather than systemic investigation. Even so, the past several years have seen a

rapid expansion in the range of experiences that we have been able to draw on" (Morgan & Krueger, p. 3). Marketing research continued its interest in focus groups through the 90s and into today. In 1993, marketer Roy Bostock wrote in the forward to *The Handbook for Focus Group Research* (first edition published in 1987): "Perhaps no technique for gaining useful information in the world of business generally, and in the arena of marketing specifically, has been used more often—sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully—than focus groups."

With focus groups now deployed in full force in both social science and marketing research, the processes and structures were becoming more indoctrinated and uniform in qualitative studies. Researchers Byers & Wilcox (1989), Frey & Fontana (1991), Kitzinger (1994), and Wilson (1997) explored the use of focus group methodology and endorsed it as an opportunity for researchers to better gather data for studies in a multitude of subjects. The techniques, procedures, and uses of focus groups were becoming more indoctrinated and iterations of the method were subject to exploration and experiment.

Focus group methodology

The typical focus group structure involves a group of participants led by a moderator who asks the questions, probes for more insight, and keeps the group on-task as they interact with each other around a large table or meeting space. "As a form of qualitative research, focus groups are basically group interviews, although not in the sense of an alternation between a researcher's questions and research participants' responses. Instead the reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are

supplied by the researcher who typically takes the role of the moderator" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). The design and composition of traditional focus groups has some variation between researchers, purpose of the interviews, and between commercial and academic purposes, but for the most part the face-to-face methodology follow similar templates. Hybrid focus groups, such as those done online and via telephone, tend to have more variation in style. In this portion of the literature review, traditional face-to-face focus group methodology is explained.

Uses and purposes. Initially, focus group discussions were seen as only a companion method to other data gathering activities in a study. However, focus group discussions have evolved to be useful in a variety of situations and today focus groups can still be used in concert with other methods or as a stand-alone methodology. The purpose of a focus group is to see if it elicits: a range of ideas or feelings, insight into behavior or motivation, or provide an explanation for quantitative data (Krueger & Casey, pp. 19-20). They specifically identify nine uses of focus groups: to help with decision making, to guide program or product development, to determine customer satisfaction, for organizational development, in understanding employee concerns, for planning or goal setting, as a needs assessment tool, for quality movements, and in policymaking and pilot testing (pp.8-12). Morgan & Spanish (1984) claims three different types of focus groups exist in market research: exploratory, clinical, and phenomenological (p. 255). Wilson (1997) categorizes uses of focus groups as: a prelude to a larger qualitative study; in conjunction with a quantitative project to broaden or deepen a researchers' understanding; to illuminate issues stemming from previously

collected quantitative data; in conjunction with other qualitative methods; and, as a stand-alone technique (pp. 215-216).

Line of questioning. Central to the focus group is the line of questioning that will be delivered by the moderator or facilitator. Determining the proper questions and in which order requires great planning and consideration. Typically, there are up to a dozen questions in most focus group discussions, flowing from opening questions, transition questions, key questions, to ending questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 41). This process is called "funneling." Morgan (1997) says there are four interviewing phases to the funnel: 1) Introductory; 2) Opening development; 3) Central Core; and, 4) Closing phase (pp. 47-51). The similarities in both approaches indicate moderators need to get participants comfortable with each other and warm up to answering questions. Next, is to introduce the topic at hand and theme of the upcoming discussion. This is followed by transitioning to the main question the researcher is hoping to have answered. Lastly, conclusion questioning coincides with the winding down of the discussion.

Krueger & Casey call the core question the "key" and suggest there should be two or three key questions that the entire discussion is actually centering around (p. 41). Because the questions are so critical to the research, are carefully thought out, and prescribed, Krueger suggests piloting questions with a test group or fellow researchers to determine efficacy and efficiency. Typically, the same questions are asked in each focus group of a research project, but can also be altered slightly if an issue is found in the earlier discussions.

Group participants. Focus groups are built off a purposeful sampling (rather than a random one) in order to better use participants who are richly involved in the information to be discussed. Recruitment methods tend to be fluid to the situation. Most times the research team will solicit volunteer participants and offer some incentive for participation. "In selecting participants for a focus group project, it is often more useful to think in terms of minimizing sample bias rather than achieving generalizability" (Morgan, 1997). In focus group methodology, homogeneity of subjects is of utmost importance. The discussants need to be closely tied to the subject and have something common to talk about – in part due to the depth of desired information for the researchers, but also to increase interactivity between members. It is imperative, for instance, that each individual have a reason to talk about a subject or some expertise to share.

The size of focus groups is sometimes determined by the subject matter or purpose of the group (Greenbaum, for instance, points toward having slightly smaller groups with highly emotional issues). Focus group size suggestions are also influenced by time and availability constraints, but ranges for effective group size tends to land between four and 12 participants. Table 1 shows a sampling of published suggestions for focus group size. The authors sampled cited the sociological definition of a small group as the foundation of the ranges, but warned groups too small tended to lack discussion breadth. "Experience has shown that smaller groups may be dominated by one or two members and that larger groups are difficult to manage and inhibit participation by all members of the group" (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Wilson (2012) wrote of a study she

conducted involving a set of focus groups: "The least useful data emerged from the larger groups, viz. 12 participants" (p. 216). Morgan and Spanish point out that more persons per group does not elicit more ideas. "They did not double as group size increased from four to eight …" (p. 255).

In analyzing these accounts as well as ranges and suggested optimal sizes given by researchers, it is surmised the optimal group size for face-to-face traditional focus groups for research is seven or eight participants per group.

Table 1

Identified Literature Pertaining to Focus Group Size

Published face-to-face focus group size recommendations			
Author(s)	**Year**	**Size range**	**Suggested**
Wilson, V.	2012	4-12	6-8
Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M.A.	2009	5-12	5-8
Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.N., & Rook, D.W.	2007	6-12	8-12
Krueger	2002	5-10	6-8
Morgan, D.L.	1996	6-10	8*
Kitzinger, J.	1994	-	6
Greenbaum, T.L.	1993	4-10	10
Albrecht, T.L., Johnson, G.M. & Walther, J.B.	1993	6-8	7*
Byers, P.Y. & Wilcox, J.R.	1991	4-8	8
Frey, J.H. & Fontana, A.	1991	8-12	8-10
Morgan, D.L. & Spanish, M.T.	1984	4-10	4-5
* Average of range when no suggested size was mentioned.			

Moderating. The moderator is one of the major influences on the success of a focus group discussion. While some focus group designs use a minimal amount of facilitator interaction, most rely on a skilled researcher leading, guiding, and coaching the discussion. "An effective moderator is one of the keys to the collection of rich and valid insights from focus groups" (Stewart et al., 2007, chapter 5). Redmond & Curtis (2007) listed important characteristics of effective moderators as warmth, ability, personality,

empathy, sensitivity, listening skills, insight, and analytical skills (p. 29). But these are not the only skills a moderator in which a moderator must be trained. Focused interview pioneers Merton, Kendall, & Fiske (1956 & 1990) point out a skilled facilitator must be deft at objectivity at much the same level of professional journalists or psychoanalytical therapists. Recent publications also speak of the multitasking a moderator must be able to exhibit. "It is important to stress that the moderator is primarily assigned a relational task, whose aim is to encourage both cohesion and confrontation of opinions within the group … this is why the moderator must encourage a group discussion rather than a group interview" (Acocella, 2012, p. 1129). Krueger and Casey (2009) agree: "Interviewing looks deceptively simple, but it requires mental discipline, preparation and group interaction skills. Much of the success of the focused interview depends on well-developed questions asked of the respondents, but another ingredient is essential: the moderator" (p.85).

The first step in moderating is greeting focus group participants and opening communication. She/he calls the group to begin, introduces the subject and the research team. The moderator next explains ground rules for the discussion and is sure to ask for contributions of all participants. From there, the moderator must successfully transition conversationally and smoothly into the line of questioning. Key tactics moderators must employ include pausing and probing deeper, asking for clarification or specificity, quelling overzealous participants and drawing underspoken ones into the fray, and interjecting non-verbal responses and humor when plausible (Krueger & Casey, pp. 94-106). The moderator should take some notes during the course of the discussion as

reminders to information recorded and are tasked with concluding the focus group in a timely and gracious manner.

Setting. The location of focus groups depends on a few factors. If the research is done for marketing or business purposes, more formal settings tend to be the setting. In social science research focus groups may best be conducted in a comfortable, convenient, or familiar location near the subjects. These settings may be a college campus, community center, church, meeting place, coffee shop, or even at a private home. Most focus group discussions last between 60 and 90 minutes, but many researchers plan for participants to commit to nearly two hours for check in and dispersal of any incentives.

The group is usually assembled so each individual can see the faces and hear others well. It is typical for participants to be seated around a table with the moderator joining them. Fellow researchers may be in the room to help take notes or assist in some other way. Snack foods and beverages are usually provided to group members.

Most focus group interviews are recorded in some way and later disseminated into a transcript for data analysis. Oftentimes a microphone or digital/tape recorder is set on a table or hung from the ceiling for the research team to later review. In many marketing focus group sessions, discussions take place in specially-built offices containing recording equipment, video feeds, and one-way mirrors.

Number of discussions in a study. Often, a set of focus groups will number between six and a dozen, but the number is typically predicated on when data becomes redundant from one focus group to another—a situation called reaching "saturation" (Krueger & Casey, p. 21). Greenbaum (1987) says budget is most often, but not the

optimal factor, in determining the number of groups in a series. “In the rare situation where budget is not the controlling issue, other factors should be considered. First, groups should almost always be conducted in multiples of two … [and] geographic location of the groups” (p. 36-38). Greenbaum later suggests keeping the number of groups as low as possible, citing cost increases as number of groups increases. “Six groups are almost half again as expensive as four, while ten groups cost almost double the cost of five. In my experience, many organizations conduct far more focus groups than they really need to meet their research objectives” (Greenbaum, pp. 96-97). Crabtree et al. (1993) say the rule of thumb is in-depth interviews require eight to 10 groups, but in some instances up to 20 groups may be required. Morgan (1996) says that four to six groups are typical, though each of these researchers cites cases in which they have conducted up to 30 focus groups in one session.

Data analysis. At the completion of each discussion, a data analysis phase begins. Focus group data analysis is systematic, verifiable, sequential, and on-going (Krueger & Casey, pp. 114-117). Following the discussion, researchers record their observations and the recording is transcribed on paper. Many researchers then analyze the data using a classic qualitative strategy of identifying themes, topics and categories of emphasis. This analysis technique can be done by hand with cutting and pasting paper, or with the aid of database-mounted computer programs such as QSR International’s NVivo 10 software. When possible, separate researchers should analyze the transcripts for codes/themes and eventually summarized findings. The researchers can later collaborate to make sure they agree on findings and summaries of the study. This technique is called inter-rater

reliability and helps minimize the effects of any biases that might occur with a single researcher conducting the analysis.

Pros-cons and challenges. Focus groups are popular with researchers and marketers for a couple of reasons. First, data gathering can take place quickly. In a matter of days groups can be assembled and questioned. Unlike individual interviewing methods, focus groups allow for a researcher to ask the same question to multiple people at the same time. Additionally, the interaction between participants tends to snowball ideas and further discussion, allowing the researcher to pay attention to trends, body language, and emphasis. "Researchers state that the essential benefit to using a focus group over other data collection tools is the direct interaction with the participants that allows the moderator the ability to clarify ambiguous information, qualify meaning, and probe for greater understanding" (Gothberg et al., 2013).

No-show rates for focus group participants can be rather high and most familiar with the method suggest recruiting more subjects than necessary to ensure enough discussants arrive for the focus group session. Greenbaum (1993) suggests over recruiting by 20-40 percent in anticipation of a typical attrition rate. Focus group participation is voluntary in nature and centers on social interaction. Because of these factors, true random selection is not attainable and those who do participate tend to be a form of convenience sampling. Additionally, less outgoing individuals and those uncomfortable with social interaction may flounder in focus group discussion or avoid volunteering altogether.

Evolution of focus groups

Traditional focus groups are confined to face-to-face (F2F) setting and were designed with all participants and moderators in one location (Gothberg et al., 2013). However, technologies developed over the past 60 years allow researchers adaptability in the design and implementation of focus groups.

Telephone and video conferencing. In 1997, Morgan wrote of advancing the art of conducting focus groups. "There is clear value in further experimentation with focus groups because trying new experiments will help us learn the range of possibilities that we could be incorporating," (p. 73) he writes. While Morgan primarily was advocating for "an array of disciplines" to take up focus group methods in their studies, he easily could be seen as calling for new formats. Greenbaum (1993) specifically named telephone focus groups as one of those new formats (p. 3). Telephone conferencing was the first modal change of venue for focus groups and remains popular today and afford the ability for the researcher and all participants to be in different locations and for the discussants to have some semblance of anonymity. A popular trend in 1980s and 1990s, teleconferenced focus groups allow researchers to reach to further geographical areas. "Focus group discussions can be conducted on the telephone—a great option for listening to people who are geographically dispersed" (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Another advantage of phone focus groups is a reduction in travel costs and space considerations. However, the downfalls of telephone focus groups (e.g."They allow only limited interaction among the participants, due to the absence of face-to-face contact" Greenbaum, p. 3) as well as emergent other technologies that allow for researchers to

accomplish the same objectives caused telephone focus groups to wane with researchers at the end of the 20th Century (Greenbaum, pp. 144-153).

The edifice of videoconferencing technology adds another nuanced option for focus group interviews. Video focus groups can be conducted over satellite transmission, via the Internet, or using close-circuit or hardwire television cable technology. Like telephone focus groups, video focus groups allow for the moderator to be in one location and participants in another (or some mix of the lot). These focus groups require very specific (and expensive) equipment as well as expertise in operating know-how.

Internet-based focus groups. The technology that most dramatically altered the focus group research landscape has been the emergence of Internet technologies. The Internet has emerged as a viable and popular option as a research data collection medium because researchers can gather data over vast geographical spaces cost-effectively. Using the Internet for a method of inquiry is evolving quickly (Krueger & Casey, 2009) with several variations contained therein. Expansion of Internet technologies and infrastructure invited other environments for focus group research. These include synchronous options for online video conferencing and online audio conferencing. At times the synchronous modes may be mixed, for instance when video is used for the focus group, but a text chat or virtual whiteboard is shared in the environment.

Online focus group discussions

Emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s in varying forms, online focus groups are described as fertile ground for conducting reliable research (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002; Schneider et al., 2002; Turney & Pocknee, 2005; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2006;

Atkinson et al., 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Blomberg et al., 2011). Two major categories of Internet focus groups exist: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communication happens in real time while asynchronous is communication that do not occur in real time. Early online focus groups of the late 1990s were often referred to as "virtual focus groups" within studies (Adler et al., 2001; Turney & Pocknee, 2005). Most of these early online adaptations of focus groups were either synchronous "chats" or asynchronous email listservs.

Initial research investigating online focus groups were comparison studies looking at the effectiveness of online focus groups versus F2F focus groups (Schneider et al., 2002; Atkinson, Lohs, Kuhagen, Kaufman, & Bhaidani, 2006). Comparison studies concluded that online focus groups maintained the major components of focus groups, and were therefore acceptable as an online version of the original F2F mode of conducting the research. Turney and Pocknee (2005) concluded that Learning Management Systems (LMS) "as a tool for formal qualitative research … [in particular online discussion boards] can be used to carry out theoretically sound focus group research" (p. 2). The amount of research on online focus groups is thin. "Although the Internet increasingly is part of our daily interactions, it remains largely unexplored as a qualitative research medium" (van Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, and Pasley (2006).

Synchronous and asynchronous formats. Online focus groups are typically categorized by their communication speed. If the communication is instantaneous (approximately the speed of in-person communication), then it is classified as synchronous. Synchronous focus groups can take place in video conferencing, audio

conferencing, and text "chat rooms." Asynchronous focus groups involve focus groups that have a delay in communication. Most often these focus groups are conducted using discussion boards or forums, email, list serve, blogs or wikis. The most common Internet-based focus groups are done using synchronous chat rooms, synchronous video/webcam conferencing, or asynchronous bulletin board forums. Early online focus groups typically utilized synchronous chat while, more recently, moderators have swayed toward asynchronous text forums. The most popular asynchronous setting for focus group discussions includes some variation of text-based discussion boards, forums, or threads.

Most early online adoptions of focus group interviewing occurred in marketing and in healthcare-related fields (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002) and often featured an attempt to replicate (as best it could) the face-to-face (F2F) focus group environment. In essence, most early adaptations were (therefore) synchronous, sometimes in the form of text chats conducted in Internet chat rooms (Schneider et al., 2002). A published Canadian study used online synchronous video focus groups to reach remote First Nation (indigenous) tribal members, with researchers saying it was a successful iteration, but difficult to manage (pp. 168-169). A similar study featured the implementation of synchronous chat as a focus group was published in 2007. In it, University of West of England-Bristol researchers Fox, Morris, and Rumsey were gathering data from young people with chronic skin conditions and wanted to capture the depth, breadth, and diversity of subject experiences (p. 540). An Internet-delivered and text-based approach was designed in hopes that it would reduce participant anxiety over appearances related to the subject in question. Seven focus groups were conducted with young people ages 11-18 discussing

in a university, password-protected chat room. The synchronous nature again presented challenges for the researcher: “Moderating synchronous focus groups requires relatively fast typing skills and some experience in the style of real-time discussion. The dynamics of real time chat can be fast, furious, and chaotic” (Fox et al., 2007). Average attendance in the synchronous focus groups was three and attrition rate was a staggering 50 percent. “Although participants have an equal opportunity to respond and contribute [in an online synchronous focus group], the participant who is most proficient at typing has the power to say the most … and the race to type and send responses might limit a participant’s presubmission deliberation. As the pace of synchronous exchanges might not foster reflective responses, contributions might be superficial” (Fox et al., 2007).

Table 2

Uses and Characteristics of Studies Using Online Focus Groups

Published Internet-delivered focus group studies							
Author(s)	**Year**	**Type(s)**	**# of FGs**	***n***	**Duration**	**Topic**	**Location**
Liu, K. K., Thurlow, M. L., Ward, J., Hatten, J., & Christensen, L. L.	2014	AD	35	225	4 days	Special Education & English Learners	United States
Gothberg, J., Applegate, B., Reeves, P., Kohler, P., Thurston, L., & Peterson, L.	2013	C, SV	6	25	45 minutes	Special Education	United States
Harmsen, I.A., Mollema, L., Ruiter, R.A.C., Paulussen, T.G.W., de Melker, H.E., & Kok, G.	2013	AD	8	60	5 days	Parents who refused to vaccinate children	Netherlands
Thomas, C., Wootten, A., & Robinson, P.	2013	AD	1	10	4 weeks	Gay & bisexual men with prostate cancer	Australia
Blomberg, K., Tishelman, C., Ternestedt, B., Törnberg, S., Levál, A., & Widmark, C.	2011	ST	30	100	2 hours	Cervical cancer screening campaign	Sweden
Gratton, M.F & O'Donnell, S	2011	SV	5	30	2 hours	First Nation health website availability	Canada
Nicholas, D.B., Lach, L., King, G., Scott, M., Boydell, K., Sawatzky, B.J., Reisman, J., Schippel, E., & Young, N.L.	2010	C, AD	3	13	1 week	Children with spina bifida, cystic fibrosis, or cerebral palsy	Canada
Tates, K., Zwaanswijk, M., Otten, R., Van Dulmen, S., Hoogerbrugge, P.M., Kamps, W.A., & Bensing, J.M.	2009	AD	3	36	5 days	Pediatric cancer experiences	Netherlands
van Eeden-Moorefield, B., Proulx, C.M., & Pasley, K.	2008	C, ST	1	26[1]	NA	Gay men discussinng relationships	United States
Fox, F.E., Morris, M., & Rumsey, N.	2007	ST	7	NA[2]	NA[2]	Young people with skin conditions	United Kingdom
Atkinson, M.J., Lohs, J., Kuhagen, I., Kaufman, J., & Bhaidani, S.	2006	AD	2	54	4 days	Sufferers of excessive facial oils	Germany & United States
Watson, M., Peacock, S., & Jones, D.	2006	AD	5	57	10 days	Repetitive Strain Injury	Switzerland & United Kingdom
Turney, L. & Pocknee, C.	2005	C, AD	3	19	1 week	Stem cell research opinions	Australia
Kenny, A.J.	2004	AD	1	38	2 months	Nurse professional development	Australia
Schneider, S.J., Kerwin, J., Frechtling, J., & Vivari, B.A.	2002	C, ST	4	59	75 minutes	Health website evaluation	United States
Adler, C.L. & Zarchin, Y.R.	2001	AE	1	7	4 weeks	High-risk pregnant women on bedrest	United States

Key: AD=Asynchronous text; AE=Asynchronous email; SV=Synchronous video; ST=Sychronous text ("chat"); C=Comparison of Internet-based vs. face-to-face.

Note: number of focus groups and *n value* refer to only the online focus groups in the study. Duration refers to duration of each online focus group.

[1] Participants were given option of the online focus group or to have a 1-on-1 online interview with the researchers. Actual number of participants in focus group unreported.

[2] The researchers failed to report any participation numbers other than to indicate they intended to have 5 person per focus group, but that most were 1-3 in size.

Pertinent research involving online asynchronous focus groups. Early online focus group studies fell into comparisons between F2F and Internet-based delivery. Schneider, et al. (2002) reported on previous online focus groups, all done using synchronous chat. They describe a lack of "media richness" (p. 33) as a downfall of these chats. "The chat room used in online focus groups is not a rich communication medium" (Schneider, et al., 2002) and results in problems with participants not being able to discern gestures, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues. However, they cite several studies that found participants devised methods of "enriching the medium" by the

use of emoticons or abbreviations such as LOL, ROTFL, :) and others (Schneider et al., 2002). Schneider et al. found that online participants tended to contribute more comments per group than the F2F, were more likely to "contribute short comments that were short statements of agreement" and that there was a more uniform amount of contribution from each participant in online focus groups than in the F2F setting (p. 38).

Burton and Goldsmith (2002) conducted one of the earliest research studies of asynchronous text discussions online and concluded that participants in the asynchronous discussion felt comfortable in the setting, described being less inhibited to speak freely, found there is some attrition of participants online (a handful never show up and some disappear after a round or two), and that it appeared moderator involvement was an important factor, though one not specifically studied. Atkinson et al. (2006) declared online focus groups successful at gathering information as well as pointing out two major affordances online: (1) the cost-effectiveness of bringing together subjects from a wide-ranging background (physical distance and cultural differences), and (2) the immediacy of having the transcription done for them (by printing the screen) and the ability to code in a timely manner, which allowed the moderator to react and revise upcoming discussions (Atkinson et al., p. 12).

Turney and Pocknee (2005) found a university-hosted LMS was the best route to gather sensitive information (Turney & Pocknee, p. 6). "This study found that the virtual focus group was a superior mechanism for data collection on attitudes …" (p. 6). Further, they pointed out the ease in downloading data and "transcribing" it for the purpose of coding. They suggested online moderators should use more open-minded questions, that

online focus groups were well suited for difficult to recruit or access populations, and hinted that saturation could be reached quickly with online focus groups (p. 7). van Eeden-Moorefield et al. (2006) found that online focus groups allow for easier access and commitment to participate from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) participants. They suggest researchers studying contexts that involve GLBT participation could best get information from online focus groups because of the perceived anonymity and increased comfort to talk openly about subjects that is garnered by online affordances. Further, they suggest online focus groups online be limited to three to five individuals to make it easier to monitor responses and better facilitate discussion (p. 199). Blomberg et al. (2011) agree with this suggestion in a separate study.

Nicholas et al. (2010) found online focus groups worked well with pediatric patients, that the online environment gave an equal footing for discussion, and that the perceived anonymity created a comfortable environment for sensitive topics (p. 111). They conclude that while online focus group participants had lower word counts overall, discussions tended to be "more honed and direct …" (p. 114).

Nearly every published report that employed the use of online focus groups in some form was not created to study the effectiveness of the technique. Primarily, these researchers were using the online methodology to gather data from large distances or in an effort to tap into populations who might be more willing to participate via a more anonymous medium. Further examples of this include a minimal study by Adler & Zarchin (2001), two nurses who conducted one of the earliest published accounts of an online asynchronous focus group. Adler and Zarchin conducted their focus groups over

email listserve with seven pregnant Australian women who were confined to bed rest due to high-risk pregnancy. Their study was conducted in 1998 and took place over four weeks with many of the participants reporting positive feelings regarding the focus group and called it more of a support group (p. 425).

Another Australian study combined the distance factor with a sensitive issue in an effort to gain access to populations previously difficult to reach. Thomas, Whootten, & Robinson (2013) worked one online asynchronous focus group over the course of four weeks with a group size of 10. The anonymous participants were asked questions surrounding their experiences as gay or bisexual (some married to women at the time) men diagnosed with prostate cancer. "The main strength of this study was the use of online technology which enabled the researchers to gain access to a group which has been previously difficult to engage," they wrote. "As the focus group was conducted over a 4-week period it also permitted participants to revisit particular subjects at any time during the duration of the study" (p. 528).

Two studies published four years apart in the Netherlands used asynchronous focus group discussions, one centering on pediatric cancer patients and the other with parents who refused a government mandate to vaccinate their young children. Tates et al. (2009) used three online focus groups in a commercial discussion environment with 11 parents of cancer patients and 18 survivors of childhood cancers. They conducted their research over five days and found self-disclosure to be high, due to perceived privacy and anonymity (p. 3). Additionally, respondents to a post-discussion survey said the

asynchronous format was highly valued due to flexibility and convenience of time and place (p. 5).

One of the more recent studies published on online focus groups involved Dutch parents who refused to vaccinate their children (Harmsen et al., 2013). The team ran eight online asynchronous focus groups, each for five straight days with 60 participants (average of 7-8 per focus group). Questions were released each day and participants were asked to check in daily to interact and respond to questions and each other. The moderator regularly checked the forum (p. 3). "Our study has both strengths and limitations," they wrote (p. 9). "The primary strength is its use of online focus group discussions and parents were anonymous and were therefore free to say whatever they wanted … a limitation might be that parents responded less to other parents' comments compared to face-to-face focus groups" (p. 10).

A similar set of online asynchronous focus groups were conducted in the United States by researchers are the National Center on Educational Outcomes (2014). In one of the largest published accounts of online focus groups, the research team gathered information from educators in five states (Arizona, Washington, Michigan, Maine, and Minnesota) who were placed into discussion boards housed within a modified Moodle LMS. Overall, the NCEO study featured 35 focus groups, each taking place in four-day intervals with an active moderator and questions released daily. At the conclusion of the study, participants were asked to fill out a volunteer survey. Of the 225 participants who completed the full focus group commitment (out of 232 registrants, or a 3.1 percent attrition rate), 135 gave feedback on the methodology. Over 99 percent of respondents to

the survey said they would gladly participate in another online asynchronous focus group similar to the one they just completed.

Group communication theory

Whether conducted in a traditional setting or variation, focus groups rely heavily on the relationship between the interview style (as originally outlined by Merton) and the entity of the group. An exploration of literature relating to group dynamics, structures, and definitions are imperative in understanding effective focus group processes.

Components and definitions. Group communication research is conducted in the fields of clinical psychology, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, instructional communication, and qualitative data gathering. Consistent threads weave through findings in each area of study and yield a universal framework important to effective small group constructs. Group communication theory can shed light on factors that have made focus groups work well in the past and could inform proper creation and consideration when using focus groups in research. Communications experts Myers and Anderson (2008) outline three components necessary for a small group to exist: (1) the group must be of a proper size; (2) the group must have interdependence; and, (3) the group must have a task or series of tasks to accomplish. Merton, a sociologist, says groups are different from *groupings*. Groups, Merton writes, have a common identity or community unity, shared norms, and goals (1987, p. 555).

Group size. The connection between the number of participants and efficacy of a small group is significant. Research shows group size momentously affects interplay between participants in work groups, brainstorming groups, psychotherapy groups, and

focus groups. General consensus of researchers places the appropriate size for small group communication to have any efficacy at all is between three and 15 members. "Regardless of how many members a group comprises, it is important to consider that all members have an influence on each other" (Myers & Anderson, p. 7). A more narrow range of efficacy can be pinpointed by the researchers. For instance, Larson (2010) cited 14 comparison studies between in-person and electronic brainstorming groups. He concluded electronic brainstorming was superior to in-person brainstorming when the group size was nine or more people (pp. 107-109). Yalom (1985) says he and consensus research in clinical psychology find the optimal group size for psychotherapy groups to be "approximately seven or eight, with an acceptable range of five to ten members" (p. 283). According to Yalom, when a group is reduced to four or fewer members it no longer operates as a group and member interaction dwindles. Changes in group size can dramatically affect how well the aggregates find cohesion. "As group size increases, so too does the tendency for group communication to become less efficient as group members encounter more difficulty managing their relationships with each other and less communication centers on the group task" (Myers & Anderson, p. 6). Larson (2010) cites empirical research showing optimal group size for brainstorming at exactly 12 participants (p. 75). No matter the discrepancy in effective group communication membership range, one point remained consistent: at some point the group becomes too large to have any effect whatsoever. There are several factors cited for this phenomenon. For instance, Latane, Williams, & Harkins (1979) argued that a disadvantage of larger groups is social loafing, "which refers to the process by which individual member efforts

decrease as the number of group members increase. The larger the group, the greater the likelihood that individual group members will become more lax in contributing to the group task" (as cited in Myers & Anderson, p. 6).

Synergy and interdependence. According to group researcher Randy Fujishin, a speech communications professor at West Valley College: "The group can take on characteristics—productivity, creativity, and responsiveness—that may not be characteristic of any one individual member. The individuals can often become energized by the collective whole. They can achieve more productivity than any member could realize alone. This is often referred to as *synergy*—the group product is usually superior to the best individual product" (2007, p. 6). Echoing the idea that several can accomplish more than one, Larson (2010) defines synergy as, "… a gain in performance that is attributable in some way to group interaction. More specifically, a group is said to exhibit synergy when it is able to accomplish collectively something that could not reasonably have been achieved by any simple combination of individual member efforts. Synergy is thus an emergent phenomenon rooted in group interaction" (p. 4). And, Larson says, synergy is real and measureable. "Synergy in groups is defined in terms of performance gains that are due to group interaction. It refers to genuine, objective performance gains, not merely to perceptions of such gains by group members" (p. 82). Collaboration increases when group members depend on each other to accomplish more as a collective than any of the individuals could alone. "The process by which a change in one part affects the other parts is called *interdependence*. In a small group, interdependence occurs

when members coordinate their efforts to accomplish their task" (Myers & Anderson, p. 7).

Interdependence and cooperative group collaboration is a key component of educational theorists. Educational and cognitive theories developed by Kurt Koffka, Kurt Lewin and Morton Deutsch (social interdependence theoricians), Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (cognitive developmental theorists), and behavior learning theory psychologists B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura (social learning theory) all worked to show collaboration and strong social development lead to higher learning outcomes and achievement (Johnson, D.W. et al., 2008). The Johnsons conclude that there are three manners in which education lessons can be structured: individualistic, competitive or cooperative; with cooperative having the most research behind higher student achievement, productivity, long-term retention, motivation, time-on-task and critical thinking. Additionally, collaborative lessons foster more positive relationships among students and greater psychological health, all of which lead to better learning environments (2008, pp. 1:1-1:6). They list five basic elements to effective cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills and group processing (Johnson, D.W. et al, 2008). Contemporary educational theorist Andrew Churches (2009) says fostering interdependence is essential in today's digital world:

> Collaboration is a 21st Century skill of increasing importance and one that is used throughout the learning process. In some forms it is an element of Bloom's and in others it is just a mechanism which can be used to

> facilitate higher order thinking and learning … Collaboration is not a 21st Century skill, it is a 21st Century essential. (p. 8)

Marc Rosenberg, an e-learning researcher, points out collaboration thrives when there is general interest or need or creates ease in attaining a task. He further writes that community membership, discussion groups, threaded discussions and instant messages put people in touch with each other and fosters interaction, which he declared the most important piece of cooperative groups (pp. 158-159). Educational researchers Hämäläinen and Häkkinen (2010), who focus their work on online class cooperative small group pedagogy expand on Rosenberg, stating that online collaborative tools must provide for goals that "a group creates something that exceeds what any one individual could achieve alone" (p. 871).

Influence of group size on interaction. While interaction, interdependence, and synergy are all desired outcomes of an effective group, only one overarching factor appears to ensure those components happen: group size. Studies dating as far back as 1950 analyze interaction in multiple groups. A published report by Harvard University researcher Robert F. Bales found the number of people in a group is superfluous to all other indicators of success via interaction. He implies smaller is better. "Hence, it might be said to apply to groups small enough so that each member potentially takes into account the reactions of each of the others" (p. 263). Psychology researchers Hackman & Morris (1975) say interaction equals quality in task-oriented groups. Additionally, the nature of a group's task tends to influence interaction greatly (p. 3). For instance, if the task is to brainstorm, interaction may be different in the same group makeup as it would

if they were given problem-solving or performance-related tasks. While those variables can affect the group interaction, the same researchers found one correlation that stood out no matter the task or group makeup: They report that the most predictive variable in determining interaction within groups is group *size*.

Motivation. Motivation is essential to the group dynamic. Myers & Anderson (2008, pp. 26-28) say there are six motives that participants carry into communications within small groups. Participants desire to have a sense of belonging (inclusion), be liked by others (affection), have the power to manipulate the environment or help change something (control), avoid other activities (escape), have fun (pleasure), and unwind or lower stress (relaxation). Aside from being motivated by a compelling task, other ways have been found to create healthy motivation in small group participants – and often can be traced back to group size. According to Larson (2010), two major factors are detrimental to brainstorming in small groups and each can be attributed to loss of participant motivation to share openly. These two factors are called evaluation apprehension and social loafing (pp. 90-93). "Brainstorming groups whose members demonstrate a strong dispositional concern for how they are perceived and evaluated by others (high social anxiety) tend to generate many fewer ideas than groups whose members do not demonstrate this disposition (low anxiety)" (Larson, p. 91). Social loafing is when individual group members lose motivation to actively participate because of a perception that their contribution cannot be discerned from the group's product. Online asynchronous focus groups inherently create a manner for individual efforts to be identified (and for the researcher to see who has and has not contributed) and therefore

minimize social loafing. While existing wholeheartedly in face-to-face groups, evaluation perception, can be disrupted online through anonymity. Pseudonyms can also be given to each participant to create unique identifiers to reinforce elimination of social loafing in the online environment.

Universal small group features exhibited in focus groups. It can be posited that components of effective small groups are intertwined with efficacy of focus groups, which are a particular form of small group collaboration. In focus groups certain foundational elements of small groups are purposefully created and controlled by the researcher in an effort to make the data gathering more efficient. In streamlining small group process, focus group researchers create environments and a line of questioning in an effort to expedite phases of orientation, warming up, socialization, inclusion, norm setting, and affection. Additionally, focus group researchers appoint a moderator to act as leader of the group and have already decided on very specific task(s) prior to gathering participants. In the terms of speech and interpersonal communications research, proper set up of a focus group discussion streamlines group processes to maximize time on task and quickly stimulate participants into open sharing, trust, honesty, and synergy.

Features of small group communication Myers & Anderson identified can be seen in focus group discussions. Focus groups have guidelines or rules to regulate behaviors, or *norms*. Focus groups also take on an *identity,* a psychological boundary that distinguishes a group member from a non-member that is sometimes referred to as "we-ness" and promote feelings of pride, cohesion, inclusion and superiority. The identity of a group can also be created by physical boundaries and can influence the types of

discussion between participants (Myers & Anderson, pp. 9-12). Focus groups are a sophisticated type of small group that carries traits of a social, service, and work groups. Online focus groups fit into Myers & Anderson's definition of a virtual group (p. 16), wherein group members work on a task from different physical locations using some form of technology.

Small groups typically need to go through a few necessary phases to be productive. First, there is an important socialization process when participants get to know each other, develop a group identity and norms, and find out roles and responsibilities. Socialization must exist for a successful group process (Myers & Anderson, 2008). To achieve optimal potential for task accomplishment, socialization must elicit trust within the group to achieve honesty and cohesion. Fujishin (2007) says problem-solving small groups have four distinct phases of development outlined by Aubrey Fisher: orientation (where members get to know one-another), conflict (where they share openly), emergence (where decisions or common ground emerge), and reinforcement (when members congratulate themselves for a job well done. Tuckman's five-phase model of group development lays out the stages each small group goes through (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), including forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Focus groups follow these phases. In online virtual focus groups, groups are formed and members come to the group concerned about their own goals. They then develop relationships (the socialization process Myers & Anderson describe) and "storm" into the group process. Members work together and get along in the norming phase before heading into the performing portion, where they ready their task for output.

Finally, members adjourn, ending their association with each other and complete the final tasks. Each of the models of effective small groups point to a phase in which participants have grown comfortable enough with each other to begin sharing deeper opinions to the point of conflict, debate or disagreement. "Conflict is a natural and expected part of group process, since it is in during this phase the group members begin to express their individual opinions and feelings," Fujishin writes. "During the conflict phase, group members begin to clarify their opinions and feelings about the issues. More energy is devoted to sharing differences of opinion, arguing positions, and debating the issues. (p. 12). In the practice of psychotherapy, self-disclosure is necessary for the group to continue. "Self-disclosure is a prerequisite for the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships … As disclosures proceed in group, the entire membership gradually increases its involvement, responsibility, and obligation to one another (Yalom, p. 361).

Analysis of discussion

Content analysis. The most common method researchers use to analyze focus group data is a form of content analysis. Klaus Krippendorff, author of several leading texts on content analysis methodology, writes: "For good reasons, interview and focus group data are frequently subjected to content analysis … [in focus groups] participants are allowed to speak freely and in their own terms. To explore the conceptions that are manifest in such conversations, researchers need to perform what amounts to content analysis on the transcripts of the conversations (2013, p. 33). Stewart et al. (2007) points out that every effort to interpret a focus group represents an analysis of content. Techniques and naming conventions under the umbrella of content analysis vary with

respect to the purpose of the analysis. For instance, discourse analysis, social constructivist analysis, ethnographic analysis and other qualitative methodological frameworks are forms of specialized content analysis. Content analysis, explicitly or implicitly identifiable, has been in formal use in modern research for over 70 years and its origins can be traced back as far as the 17th Century (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 10).

Content data analysis is defined as a research method entailing a set of systemic procedures carried out on readings of symbolic matter (such as texts and images) to make valid inferences about the sender of a message, the message itself, the body of text, or the audience of a message (Krippendorff, 2013; Weber, 1990). Because content analysis is procedural and scientific in nature while simultaneously interacting with qualitative inferences, the methodology is considered a mixed method mode of analysis (Weber, 1990, p. 10). The framework for designing a valid and reliable content analysis scheme involves a series of steps: (a) determining the unit of analysis, which Krippendorff calls "unitizing" (2013, p. 98); (b) defining categories or variables that are sometimes called codes; (c) piloting the coding on a small sample to test it out; (d) assess coding rules and revise as necessary; and,(e) code all the text and explore when accuracy was achieved (Weber, 1990, pp. 21-24).

Analyzing components of focus group discussions. Most focus group researchers use a well-developed form of content analysis to examine *content* of the focus group discussions to come to conclusions in their study findings. A systemic method for analyzing the constructs and design possibilities of *discussion* itself has not been clearly established. "Focus groups have received little empirical scrutiny in both marketing

literature and other disciplines" (Byers & Wilcox, 1991, p. 70). Fern (1982) conducted one of the few extensive examinations of the foundational constructs of focus group methodology. He conducted a study on focus groups that were funded by the United States Department of Defense and centered on female opinions regarding expanding women's role in the military (p. 3). Fern designed his study with four independent variables: group type (group or individual interview), moderator (moderated or loosely facilitated), group size (1, 4, or 8 participants), and acquaintanceship (strangers or those familiar with each other). The dependent variables in Fern's study were (1) the number of unique ideas relevant to the discussion topic and (2) the judged quality of the ideas (p. 5). He admitted the judgments of quality was a challenging task: "Admittedly, this procedure poses a problem common in focus group research—the quality of the information is based on a single judgment" (Fp. 5). Fern went through the transcripts and gave a ranking of ideas generated by participants, labeling these as major, subordinate, and ancillary thoughts. He used only the category of "major thoughts" (those he dubbed meaningful, relevant, and unique) as his count of ideas generated, which he then compared between group size. He later assigned a similar value to "relevant ideas," and later "quality of ideas" (he suggested that quality could be seen as *originality, feasibility, effectiveness, importance,* and *uniqueness*, but argued the purpose of the task as assigned by the client or research question was a realistic judge of quality, so he laid them out two-fold as specific to the issue of women in the military). In the end, Fern concluded that eight was optimal size for a (face-to-face) focus group purposed with generating ideas. [In addition, Fern found a skilled moderator had an effect on the discussion quality, that participant

acquaintanceship slightly decreased quality, and that group idea generation was not superior or inferior between individual and group discussions.]

Many focus group researchers (Morgan, Krueger, Kitzinger, to name a few) center their interest in the area of interaction between participants while another handful (Joinson, Davis et al., Byers & Wilcox) point to participant self-disclosure as the key variable in discussion quality.

Analysis of *online* discussions. While a few valuable studies research text-based discussion forums used in Internet-based educational settings, little extant literature explores forums used to *gather data* for qualitative researchers. Common research strategies for evaluating these online class discussions are often limited to quantitative (e.g. word counts and posting frequency rates) and post positivistic (e.g. surveys about user experience) methodologies. Many studies largely ignore analysis of the primary data source – the content of the transcripts themselves. "Very few researchers tackle the difficulties of analysing [sic] the educational quality of conference interactions" (Mason, 1992, p. 106). Moreover, educational researchers of online discussion applied the crux of their analysis methods upon online class-situated discussion boards and their protocols fixate on knowledge construction, knowledge creation, and/or concept retention. In short, the published studies are not focused on the elements of *discussion* and do not provide a specific protocol outside of educational outcomes. At best, it is worthwhile to take a deeper look into researchers' analysis of online asynchronous class discussions to determine a framework for analyzing online asynchronous focus group discussions.

Educational researchers Marra, Moore, and Klimczak (2004) found that despite "the importance of these forums, predominantly used methods for assessing the content and outcomes of these forums has often been limited to frequency counts and other quantitative measures" (p. 23). Early studies lack meaningful qualitative analysis protocol such as content analysis, but in recent years, content analysis has jumped to the forefront of qualitative protocol for online discussion analysis. A dominant technique has not emerged. Offshoots include conversation analysis and discourse analysis, each centering on measurement of the levels of participant learning rather than the flow and richness of discussion. For instance, one of the seminal online discussion content analysis frameworks set forth by Henri (1992) was created for educators to analyze messages in online education environments. Henri highlighted five dimensions of the learning process that are "exteriorized" in messages: participation, interaction, social, cognitive, and metacognitive processes. "The social aspects of virtual groups are no disadvantage; they contribute, rather, to the richness of the interactive process … the results, and the meaning to be derived from a session of computer conferencing, are the fruit of a collective endeavor" and messages should be looked at using content analysis techniques that have previously used on printed text (Henri, p. 119). The crux of Henri's analysis method is to look for levels of each of the five skills, most importantly cognition. She broke down cognitive pieces into strata of content from low-level to high-level.

Derivations of Henri's approach are evident in the works of numerous researchers (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2003; Marra, Moore, & Klimczak, 2004). Marra et al. (2004) surmise the most important characteristic in analyzing online

discussions is interaction (p. 24) and went about using an interaction analysis model (IAM) developed by Gunwardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997) to dissect discussions from an online graduate course in instructional design. The study compared IAM with those focusing on critical thinking skills and found IAM had strengths that would be beneficial to researchers searching for more holistic findings in their content analysis of online discussion forums. Marra et al. suggest the purpose of the discussion is the most important factor in designing a quality-driven content analysis framework.

Hara, Bonk. & Angeli (2000) expanded on Henri's content analysis model to explore student interactions in a student-centered online class discussion. They used the paragraph as the base measurement unit and analyzed the content in the areas of interaction (explicit and implicit), social cues, cognitive skills (based on Bloom's Taxonomy), and metacognition (planning, self-regulation, self-questioning, reflection). Hara et al., found that most online interactions were one-way and that cognitive processing increased over time (the study looked at 12 weeks of discussions).

A more recent study conducted by Nandi, Hamilton & Harland (2011) again laments the lack of published empirical investigation of interaction in online class discussions (p. 5) despite the fact that "asynchronous discussion forums are widely used to facilitate interactions in online classes … the quality of this interaction determines the success of learning online (p. 6). Nandi et al. applied two different frameworks to study interaction. The first was to measure learning on three different interactions: student-and-student, student-and-instructor, and student-and-content. The other framework involved looking at quality of discussion through tone, grammar, number of words, reasoning,

level of controversy and simple content (p. 7). This all resulted in a 26-category measurement tool wherein they created a rubric of poor, satisfactory, good, and excellent ratings of each interaction (p. 24) and concluded that interaction is important and often occurs in online class discussions.

Roblyer and Wiencke (2004) also created a rubric for instructors to use to better assess (give grades) and give feedback to students on their interaction in online course discussion. They recommend the word "dialogue" best refers to the type of interaction that occurs in asynchronous text-based discussions. Another study, this one conducted by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer (2007) suggest smaller segment units of the transcript that are the basis for a researcher's unit of measurement (or unitizing), the less useful to the overall content analysis. "Fixed units such as single words or entire messages are objectively recognizable, but they do not always properly encompass the construct under investigation" (Rourke et al., p. 7). They recommend using a message unit as the best approach.

Perhaps the most in-depth application of content analysis of online and face-to-face focus groups was conducted by Gothberg et al. (2013) who opted to study what they call the "five most important focus group characteristics as reported and agreed upon in the literature: participant interactions, breadth of conversation, depth of conversation, disclosure of sensitive information, and adherence to the topic" (p. 110). Gothberg et al. created the analysis categories in a comparison study of three different types of focus groups: traditional face-to-face, synchronous Internet video, and telephone. They conducted the discussions with participants ages 16-21 who received public school

special education services. The focus groups were commissioned by the National Transition Technical Assistance Center of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in hopes of assessing student reactions to services provided them. In gathering the data, the research team also investigated which "venue" (environment) worked best with that population. The Gothberg et al. study is significant to the area of methodology analysis for focus group discussions due to the scope of the study, the efficacy of their framework, and given the lack of quality analysis examples in the literature. They adopted two techniques in their framework: content analysis and discourse analysis. The Gothberg study used the level of each individual focus group as the unit of analysis (n=18). Each focus group used identical protocols, were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded in qualitative analysis software (pp. 113-114). The analysis was based on Social Penetration Theory. For participant interaction, they looked at participant-to-participant interaction. In breadth of conversation, they identified and counted each topic covered by a focus group. To analyze depth of conversation the centered their investigation on Question 3 of the discussions and ranked levels of conversation by linguistic markers. Disclosure of sensitive information was identified as individuals disclosing their name and disability as well as other information surrounding their special needs accommodations. Finally, for adherence to topic, the team graded conversations as on-topic or off-topic. This analysis framework elicited solid findings, according to the authors (p. 118), in part allowing them to conclude face-to-face focus groups worked best for interactions of all types and the telephone focus groups tended to stifle participant-to-participant interaction (p. 120). Telephone focus groups were slightly more effective in

depth of conversation and in extracting sensitive information. “Moreover, the results suggest the more anonymous the venue, the greater the disclosure of sensitive information” (p. 121). The synchronous video online focus groups were dubbed inferior on each level of content analysis.

Use of focus groups in evaluation of PK-12 professional development

Focus groups can be used to evaluate PK-12 educator professional development workshops. Coincidentally, the method also coincides with best-practices outlined by researchers to maximize the success of educator professional development. A compelling topic wherein individuals have a vested interest (or feeling of contributing to change) is one Krueger & Casey (2009) identify as a strong candidate for effective and lively discussion. Other factors to motivate teachers to discuss without excessive prodding by the moderator include topics that are timely and fit into the context of their personal and professional lives.

Utilizing online focus groups in professional development evaluation. A variety of names are used to describe the field of educator professional development, including Teacher Professional Development (Abdal-Haaq, 1996; Borthwick & Pierson, 2008; Hooker, 2009), In-Service (Champion, 2003), Staff Development (Champion, 2003; Guskey, 1994), and/or Professional Learning (Hirsh, 2014). While researchers haven’t settled on a uniform name for the field, a few key components of best practice have emerged. The education professional development organization Learning Forward (formerly known as the National Staff Development Council) identifies seven standards for effective professional learning, highlighted by a structure for collaborative inquiry

through learning communities and also effective implementation measured by a change in educator practice, knowledge and student results (Hirsh, 2014). Guskey (1994) posits the efficacy of professional development is strongly related to how well the program content is contextually relevant to educators. Additionally, two key guidelines to effective professional development Guskey highlights are to "Work in Teams to Maintain Support" and "Provide Continued Follow-Up, Support, and Pressure" (pp. 13-18). Champion (2003) sees collaboration as an important cog throughout and after the process: "Treat whatever learning data you collect as formative data, meaning that the data should be used immediately to improve the program … Collaborate with your participants about what alterations make the most sense to help them build their competence and implement what they are learning" (p. 3). Asynchronous online follow-up works well to cover these bases, especially when given the specialized construct of the focus group methodology. "Success of online learning communities requires appropriate communication tools and structured learning activity, as well as connection with existing learning communities, peer experts, and initiatives" (Borthwick & Pierson, 2008, p. 5).

Summary

While face-to-face focus group discussions remain the most popular and widely documented form of the methodology, the Internet continues to gain popularity as a venue for social science and marketing researchers. However, as utilization of Internet-based focus groups has increased, research has lagged. This review of literature provided information related to the origins, influences, research, and considerations related to the design and measurement of the online asynchronous text-based focus groups. It shows

how focus group discussions are carefully and specifically designed, purposeful, and effective. It went on to look at how focus groups have evolved with the development of technologies, and centered closely on today's online format. Further examination of literature showed how small group dynamics and the key elements of group discussion are universal across several disciplines. From these elements, and a handful of previous studies, key components of online asynchronous discussion were discovered. Evidence in the literature shows a study of online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions is timely and warranted. In the next chapter, Methodology, the research context, design, and methods used to study optimal size for OAFG are described.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Years ago I heard a veterinarian talk about breeds of dogs. He was offering suggestions about which breed of dog to select. One tip was particularly interesting. The vet said that when a breed suddenly becomes popular, the quality of that breed begins to suffer because some dog breeders will attempt to meet the demand by breeding dogs without regard to quality standards. Popularity and quality are at odds. Perhaps this applies to research methodology as well as dogs.

- Richard A. Krueger (1993, p. 65)

The intent of this study is to determine the optimal size for online asynchronous text-based focus groups. With this context in mind, descriptions of the research methods are organized into several sections. Included in this chapter are the conceptual framework, contextual background, participants, materials, setting, procedures, quantitative and qualitative designs, and analysis procedures.

Conceptual framework

This dissertation applied a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Mixed methods design is strongly aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of pragmatic knowledge claims—problem-centered, real-world approaches to solving questions (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Multiple strategies of inquiry were also necessary because of the lack of research found in literature. Certain types of research problems call for specific approaches, and this study matched both the qualitative and qualitative formulae: "If the problem is identifying factors that influence an outcome, the utility of an intervention, or understanding the best predictors of outcomes, then a quantitative approach is best … on the other hand, if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach" (Creswell, pp. 21-22).

Another desired outcome of mixing qualitative and quantitative methods is how they counteract or neutralize inherent biases that might emerge in any single methodological approach. This is referred to as "triangulation" (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), "The logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations" (p. 555). Guba (1990) categorizes this type of study as falling under the basic belief system of postpositivism: "If human sensory and intellective mechanisms cannot be relied upon, it is essential that the 'findings' of an inquiry be based on as many sources—of data, investigators, theories, and methods—as possible. Further, if objectivity can never be entirely attained, relying on many different sources makes it less likely that distorted interpretations will be made" (p. 21).

Theorists contend qualitative and quantitative strategies can be mixed in three constructs: sequentially (where one method is employed first, then a different method follows to build further understanding of the first), transformative (sometimes called a nested design, with one method contained inside another), and concurrent (where methods are deployed at the same time). For this study, quantitative and qualitative data gathering occurred concurrently.

Constraints

Due to the academic nature of this study, its purposes are to create knowledge (where a gap in knowledge exists), to evaluate the practice of conducting online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions more effectively, and to inform further research. This study is not subject to more ethics approval beyond university IRB

oversight. The academic nature of this study also limits access to more than a swatch of subjects, participation incentives, and resources. Due to practical constraints, the scope of the study does not engage with subjects outside the realm of educators and is limited to adult participants.

Context

A significant aim of this study was to include a real example of a representative research topic as the backdrop for the online discussions. The nature of the topic and the participant pool significantly impacts the efficacy of a focus group to generate interaction and rich data (Kenny, 2004; Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1997; Stewart et al., 2007). Focus group research must begin with precise planning. "Problem definition requires a clear statement of what kinds of information are desirable and from whom this information should be obtained. A clear understanding of the problem or general research question is critical because it gives rise to the specific questions that should be raise by the moderator and identifies the population of interest" (Stewart et al., 2007, Chapter 3). Therefore, if a proper study of group size effects was to be done on the methodology, the context within which the study was conducted demanded important and careful consideration. It is for this reason an in-depth look at the context and how it was arrived upon is included in this portion of the chapter.

Determination of subject matter

Culling the substance upon which the study's focus group participants would be purposed with discussing proved an arduous task. A diligent process was implemented to winnow possible topics to a final selection. The central tenets of traditional focus group structure were used as a framework for decision-making.

Krueger & Casey (2009) identify key elements that must exist for focus group discussion to remain true to its name: "purpose, size, composition, and procedures" (p. 2). Since the crux of this study was to determine optimal size for conducting online asynchronous focus groups, size would be the variable characteristic. Other characteristics would remain constant. The overabundance of possibilities was narrowed under the following criteria and based upon Krueger & Casey's remaining keys. For the scope of this study, the topic needed to include:

1) access to a population that would elicit 100 or more willing volunteers;
2) a partnership with an entity that was flexible to my research and could aid in recruitment, incentive, or all three;
3) a purpose that would fulfill one of the strategic reasons a focus group might be used (as outlined by Krueger & Casey, 2009): for decision-making, to inform product or program development, or to give insight on an organizational concern or issue (e.g. customer satisfaction, organizational development or restructuring, examining employee concerns, setting goals, planning, assessing needs, improving quality, policy-making, or for pilot testing); and,

4) an issue to maximize potential (marked by Merton et al., 1990, and Morgan, 1997) … one as relevant as possible to the participants, provide specific data for the client, foster interaction between participants, and evokes or explores participant emotion and feelings.

Further, two personal preferences were of consequence. First, that the data be original and derived in concert with the research plan (i.e., not extant or priori data). Second, given a professional career and graduate studies that revolved around teaching and learning, the subject fall within the nexus of K-12 education.

A target matching the research criteria emerged. In early January 2014 a proposal was presented to the superintendent and professional development coordinator central to a consortium of school districts. Follow-up meetings helped specify topic, purpose, and timeframe. Questions and protocol were formulated collaboratively between researcher and administrative team.

Nature of the professional development workshops

Focus groups were conducted with educational staff who had attended professional development workshops centered on the issue of PK-12 race-based achievement and disciplinary gaps. The focus groups helped evaluate the efficacy of the workshops. The workshops themselves would be fertile ground for exploration in many fields of research, so a deeper look into this backdrop is warranted.

The workshops were facilitated by a national educational consulting group under contract with a consortium of 12 urban and suburban school districts. The consortia comprise much of the western portion of a large Midwestern United States metropolitan

area. Workshops were held in the meeting hall of a large suburban Jewish synagogue and open to all staff from any of the member districts. Two of the consortia districts required every staff member to attend a seminar at some point in the individual's employment, while the remainders strongly encourage staff involvement. Attendees of the workshop received 14 hours of continuing education units, commonly referred to as CEUs, which could be applied to the state's individual teacher and administrative licensing requirements. Because of these dynamics, workshops were offered several times throughout the year and well-attended. Two of the consortia districts required all staff members to attend a seminar at some point in the individual's employment, while the remainders strongly encourage staff involvement.

Between January and April 2014, four different two-day workshops were observed in duration. This was done in an effort to gather insights helpful in moderating the focus groups, to see if variations in attendee experiences might influence focus group data, and to allow for in-person recruitment of volunteers. It is my belief that my attendance was invaluable to enhancing research and recruitment success.

Each session featured a sole facilitator who led both days of the workshop. In each of the different offerings similar curriculum, materials, and pedagogical strategies were deployed. There were three different facilitators observed, each a person of color and trained and employed by the consulting group. One woman facilitated two different workshops observed. The other two workshops were led by individual men.

The seminars outlined a protocol of conversations in an attempt to engage, sustain and deepen interracial dialogue. Attendees were charged to explore their own racial

identities and begin to unpack the ways that systemic racism affects all areas of education and the inequities educational systems reify. A main thrust of the workshop was getting participants to acknowledge that conversations about race, racism, and whiteness are difficult and complex, and for those reasons, often get ignored or disregarded. Much of the workshop revolves around attendees sharing information or discussing race with another attendee or the entire group. Objectives of the workshop were open-ended, and therefore attendees were encouraged to accept "non-closure" and to expect no technical solutions (e.g., actions, curricular materials, pedagogical strategies). Having the courage to engage in the difficult conversation and sustain it long enough to work towards real change was the consulting group's stated goal of the workshops. For many, the workshops appeared to be an emotionally charged experience, evidenced by numerous observations of attendees who: (1) disclosed personal information to the rest of the attendee group via microphone; (2) showed emotional expression, most often crying; and, (3) articulated an emotional state or feeling to the group (e.g., anger, fear, hope, excitement, sadness).

Additionally, the workshops contained a heterogeneous mixture of staff not commonly seen in educational professional development seminars. While attended primarily by teachers, they also included a broad spectrum of school staff including paraprofessionals, aides, support staff, bus drivers, custodians, food workers, administrators, district personnel, and school board members.

Stimulation of discussion through topic

Herein, a structure is shown that had an optimal chance at stimulating focus group discussion. There was a strong subject (two-day workshops); purpose (evaluation of a specific professional development offering); population available for recruitment; and, a cooperative partner (collaborative school districts). Current events helped the focus group topic even further when issues of race-based achievement and disciplinary gaps in United States schools were brought to the forefront of the country's political and educational dialogue as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan acknowledged the issue as a crisis during a speech on March 21, 2014. Duncan called the gaps "alarming" and noted "systemic problems driving the opportunity and achievement gaps … our deep concern for equity and closing opportunity gaps drives everything we do at the Department … our work is motivated by the belief that all students, regardless of race, gender, income, disability, and English Language Learner status, need and deserve world class education." The Secretary's comments intersected with those of the consulting group's foundational beliefs that systemic racism is the overarching cause for the underachievement of students and is the dominant factor of societal rifts. The group, founded in 1992, has published numerous books and conducted workshops across the country in addition to being contracted often by the consortia centering this study. Its approach is often controversial and polarizing. With the timeliness and controversy swirling around the workshop's core, another criteria was satisfied – a topic that would set the stage for interactive and emotional discussion.

Finally, in an effort to determine if the sizable portion of its professional development budget is being used effectively, consortia leaders were motivated to gain insights, reactions, and feedback from participants. They intended to use the findings from the online focus groups as means to evaluate the offering and make decisions about the program's development. Combined, the aforementioned show the subject passed or exceeded criteria of prime focus group discussion.

Recruitment

Participants of this study were adults who attended the professional development workshops centering on issues of race-based achievement and disciplinary gaps in PK-12 education. Participants attended one of four different workshops. The pool of possible subjects consisted of 267 attendees.

Seven different correspondences occurred in an effort to recruit volunteers: in an email sent by the workshop's administrator prior to the seminar; physical flier left on tables at the workshop; twice daily (four total) in-person appeals by myself; and, one post-workshop reminder email sent by the professional development coordinator.

Registration

Volunteers indicated their interest in participating by filling out a form that included their name and email address. They were next emailed a hyperlink to an online registration form created in Google Drive, a digital description of the study and what was consented to by registering. The registration form included a request for name, address, email address and other demographic information.

At the conclusion of the two-day workshop, volunteers were given a unique identification number and the number was placed into a random group generator found on the Internet at http://www.random.org. Groups were sized on need for variations in group size but restricted to the numbers of volunteers from that particular workshop. Each participant was given a pseudonym and respective avatar and placed into a group. Pseudonyms were lake names and no two participants had the same name. Avatars were chosen by the researcher and represented generic lake scenes (i.e., boats, fish, beach, turtles, etc.).

Once placed into a focus group, participants were emailed their unique login and password information. Included in this email was a link to information on how to log in, post, and change passwords. The how-to information was both in printed form and in video form, narrated by me. They were asked to check in at least one day prior to the beginning of discussion to test their login information and troubleshoot any technical issues.

Incentives

To aid in the recruitment of volunteers, the cooperating school district agreed to offer three additional CEUs to anyone who fully participated in the online focus groups. Participants were also told their name would be entered into a drawing for one of 16 Amazon Kindle e-reader tablets, which I purchased with personal funding. The 16 Kindles were drawn randomly using participant ID numbers entered into the http://www.random.org website. All 84 participants who completed the study were entered into the drawing, which resulted in a 1-in-5.25 chance of winning.

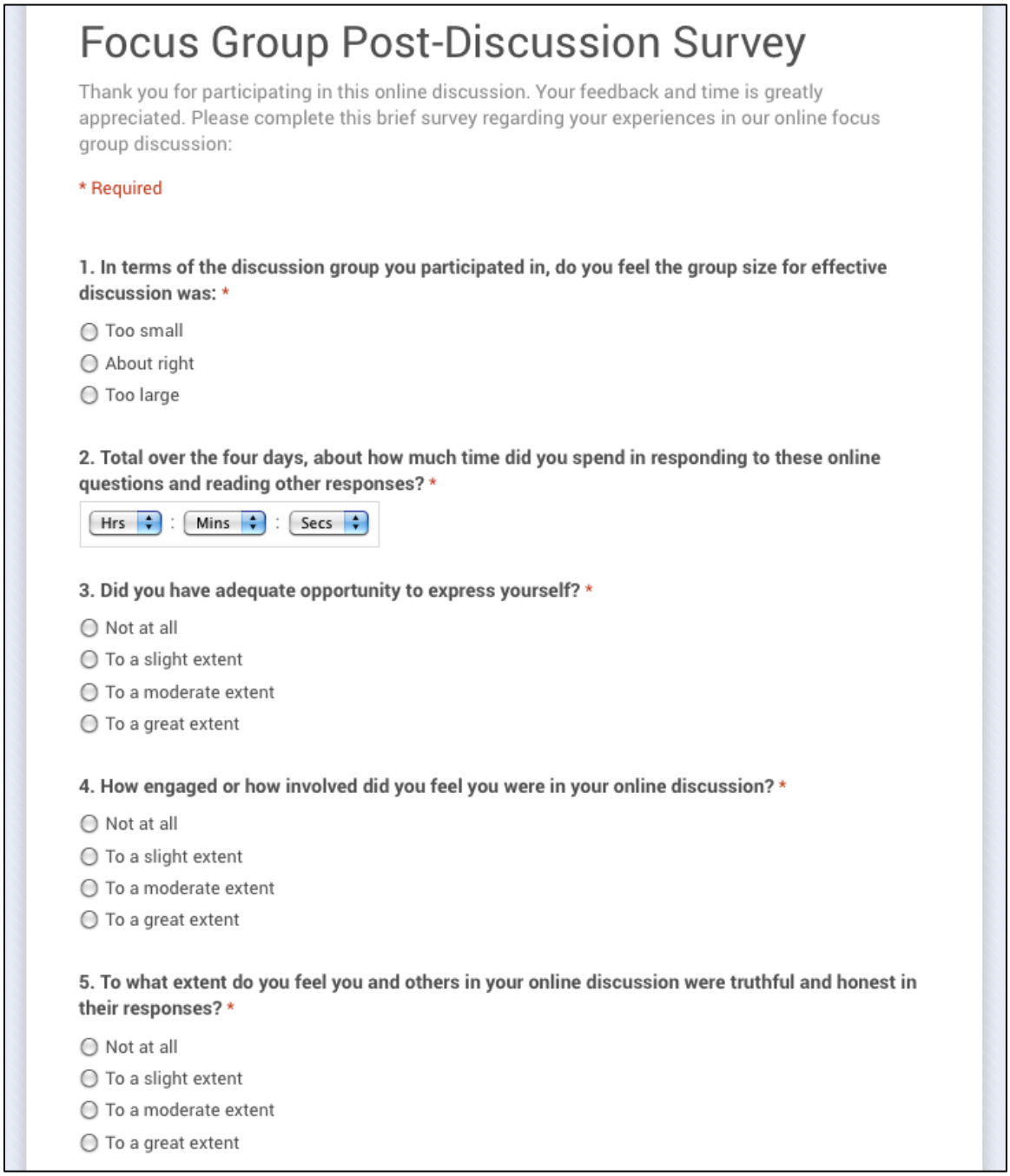
Materials

The materials used in the study consisted of an online registration form, focus group transcripts, and an online post-participation survey.

Registration form. A registration form was emailed to volunteers who indicated a desire to participate in the online discussions. Participants who completed the online registration provided their name, mailing address, email address, gender, race/ethnicity, school district, job title, age category, years working in education, and answers about previously attending the workshop and whether their employer required them to attend. The registration form can be seen in full in Appendix A.

Transcripts. Full transcripts of all eight focus group discussions were captured in an online database and downloaded into Microsoft Word documents. Transcripts were cleaned up and prepared with consistent styling before import into QWSR International NVivo 10 data analysis software.

Post-discussion online survey. Upon completion of Day 4, the final day of each focus group, participants were asked to take a short online survey. Each focus group had its own survey, but the questions were the exact same. Surveys were created in Google Drive and responses were collected in an online Google spreadsheet before being downloaded into Microsoft Excel, where data were cleaned up and formatted for ease of understanding. The online survey contained both quantitative Likert scale rating response questions and qualitative open-ended questions. See Figures 1 and 2 for screenshots of the post-discussion survey and Appendix B for the complete list of survey questions.



Focus Group Post-Discussion Survey

Thank you for participating in this online discussion. Your feedback and time is greatly appreciated. Please complete this brief survey regarding your experiences in our online focus group discussion:

* Required

1. In terms of the discussion group you participated in, do you feel the group size for effective discussion was: *

- ◯ Too small
- ◯ About right
- ◯ Too large

2. Total over the four days, about how much time did you spend in responding to these online questions and reading other responses? *

Hrs : Mins : Secs

3. Did you have adequate opportunity to express yourself? *

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ To a slight extent
- ◯ To a moderate extent
- ◯ To a great extent

4. How engaged or how involved did you feel you were in your online discussion? *

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ To a slight extent
- ◯ To a moderate extent
- ◯ To a great extent

5. To what extent do you feel you and others in your online discussion were truthful and honest in their responses? *

- ◯ Not at all
- ◯ To a slight extent
- ◯ To a moderate extent
- ◯ To a great extent

Figure 1: Screenshot of the first half of the post-discussion survey.

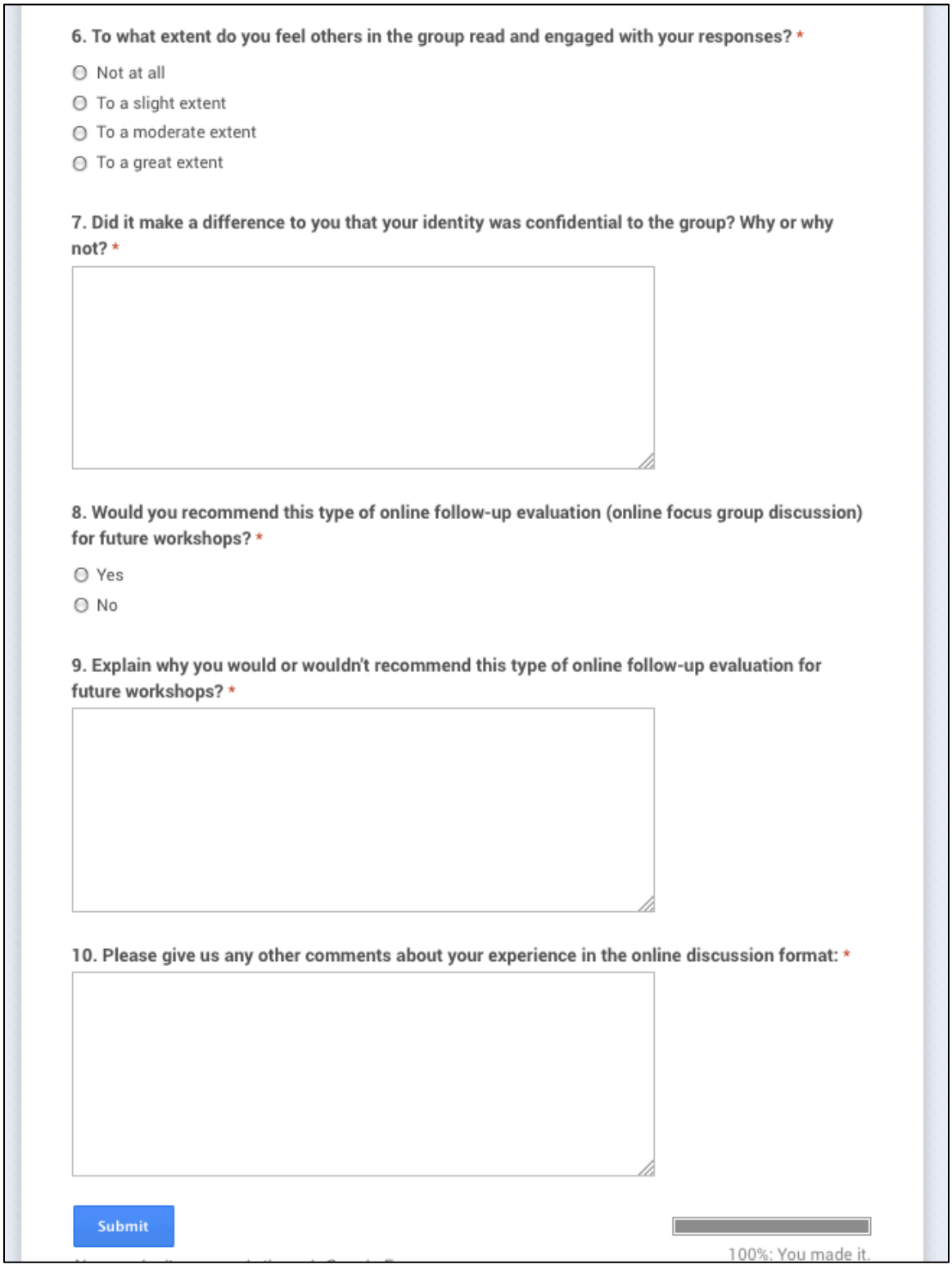


Figure 2: Screenshot of second half of the post-discussion survey.

Setting

Researchers must take careful consideration to the focus group venue (Morgan, 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2009). Given the online environment of this study, it was imperative that considerations of technological and web design construction be considered. Participants' feelings about the online environment may affect engagement and interactions between group members (Hatten, J., Christensen, L., Liu, K., & Goldstone, L., 2014). Issues of aesthetics, format, usability, cognitive load, and technological functioning can negatively influence the amount and quality of interaction (cf. Kirschner, Strijbox, Kreijns, & Beers, 2004; Norman, 2004; Wilson, 2005), so great care was taken in an effort to reduce negative influences of the environment.

In reference to the successes of focus group researchers in using content management systems (Hatten, Goldstone, & Liu, 2012; Turney and Pocknee, 2005), a modified Moodle website was chosen. It was housed on a commercial server with a unique Uniform Resource Locator (URL) and password protected. Design was approached from a combination of frameworks set forth by Kirschner, Strijbos, Kreijns, & Beers (2004) and Donald H. Norman (2003) wherein the Moodle site would have to be altered for the online focus group methodology. As an LMS, Moodle contains a plethora of management and pedagogical tools, including blogs, document uploaders, grading systems, and audio-video capabilities. While these capabilities are dynamic and helpful to an online teacher, they may become cumbersome to quality data-gathering and components deemed unnecessary for users (research subjects) and moderator in focus

group discussions were removed. What was left was a login screen, which led to a single focus group for each and only discussion threads.

The minimized Moodle also was minimal in aesthetic design. This approach followed the Kirschner, et al. (2004) principle of designing for usability, utility, and aesthetic. Usability and utility are combined into one area called "usefulness." The usefulness – or purpose – of what the environment was built for is data gathering. It was to foster discussion and to minimize any roadblock a user might have in getting into a discussion, reading a discussion, posting a response and logging out. In designing the Moodle discussion website with respect to usefulness and aesthetics, user experience was a concerning factor. Garrett (2003) calls user experience to the forefront of an Internet – based environment in his book *The Elements of User Experience*. "The world's most powerful functionality will falter and fail if users can't figure out how to make it work. Simply put, if your users have a bad experience, they won't come back" (Garrett, p. 14). Returning is of significant importance in the online focus group as users will need to voluntarily return for four straight days. Norman (2002) says designers should focus on converging design with user experience. For instance, a designer should anticipate what a user *will* do so the design matches that pattern. Two of Norman's specific design suggestions were at the forefront of the design of the discussion Moodle to better enhance the user experience would match design expectations: "Simplify the structure of the tasks" and "Make things visible: bridge the gulfs of Execution and Evaluation" (2002, p. 188).

Online focus group structure

The structures of online focus groups vary from study-to-study (see Table 2) and no discernable guidelines are seen as precedence for the method. Components such as number of questions, number of days, number of questions per day, online moderation technique, timeframes for participants, and other similar protocol suffer discrepancy from study to study. With regards to asynchronous text-based online focus groups, previous studies show certain trends that point to successful data gathering.

Questions. Few published reports speak to the number of questions presented discussants each day and/or at what intervals. Some researchers posted questions all at one time with a certain period of time given for all participants to post responses. Others posted a certain number of questions each day of the discussion and had a set time for those questions to be conversed over. Total number of questions was also rarely published.

Duration. In this study, each focus group began on a Monday and ran four consecutive days. Participants were asked to login and post responses on two questions per day. They had 24 hours to respond to questions and respond to other participant responses (e.g. "interact") before the next set of questions would be released. There were eight questions total. The moderator responded and interacted with participants throughout the day and evening and asked the participants to do the same as their schedules allowed.

Four days was decided upon based on six previous studies using online asynchronous focus groups, each conducted between four days and one week (Turney &

Pocknee, 2005; Tates et al., 2009; Nicholas et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2013; Harmsen et al., 2013).

Questions were set up in a funneled approach (Morgan, 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2009) with Day 1 questions being more general in approach and introducing the topic. Day 2 questions worked into positives and negatives of participant experiences in the workshop. The questions on the third day contained the "key" questions, seeking specific examples and suggestions from participants. Day 4 allowed for further discussion and questions revolving around the experience of being in an online focus group. Most of Day 4's questions were central to this dissertation and not focused on the workshop itself. Focus group questions can be found in Appendix C.

Size. There were three different variations on group size for this study. Determination of group size variants was based on standard recommendations for face-to-face focus groups, which place size at between four and 12 participants. A study by Fern (1982) placed the ideal size for a face-to-face focus group at eight participants. Given this range, three treatment group sizes were studied: Small, medium, and large. The "small" groups were those between 3 and 7 participants. "Medium" ranged between 8 and 13. "Large" groups were focus groups with 15 or more participants. Subjects were placed into groups based on the amount of volunteers from a particular workshop and number of treatments that were filled at the time of the group construction. At the end of each recruitment period, the volunteers who signed up for the study were given an identification number and entered into a random number order generator. Groups were then chosen by random order. Groups were typically over-booked in anticipation of a 20

percent no-show/dropout rate. When attrition between registrants and actual participants existed, the number of people who completed the discussion were the only ones counted in the final group size.

Norming. Efforts were taken to reduce any confounding variables. In addition to aforementioned website design considerations, multiple tutorials were created in an effort to norm the base knowledge or skill of each participant. One tutorial was created in .pdf format with text and screenshots depicting all aspects of working in the discussion board. The text-based tutorial can be found in Appendix D. Another tutorial was a narrated screen-capture video of the same information. Screen shots of the video tutorial can be found in Appendix E. The tutorials were emailed to participants prior to commencement of discussions and included as resources on the website.

Protocol. A protocol of moderator parameters was created to control variations in moderating from discussion to discussion. The protocol included:

- Identic email correspondences from moderator to participants. Each email contained the same wording and was sent at the same time in each discussion's timeline.
- Uniform amounts of moderator interaction with participants. Fern's 1982 study found a skilled and active moderator worked best in face-to-face focus groups, so a significant – but consistent -- level of facilitation was desired. The protocol for moderation was to send out the same emails at the same intervals for each group, to maintain a neutral and objective tone, and to interact (via posting of messages) at the same rate. The

moderator would respond to every person in the group one time on the first day. In Days 2-4, the moderator would interact two times over the course of the entire day—most often asking a clarifying question of participants or for concrete examples.

- Payments of incentives were done once all of the data was gathered (conclusion of all of the discussions).

Research strategy

Built on a framework of mixed methods techniques derived from the progressive works of Henri (1992), Hara, Bonk, & Angeli (2000), Mara, Moore, & Klimczak (2004), and Gothberg et al. (2013), the data are analyzed using qualitative measures, content analysis, and quantitative values. Data gathered for this project were therefore both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Using a side-by-side comparison of small, medium, and large focus groups, yield differences between the treatment (size) and data (discussion) were rendered for six variants of interest: (1) adherence to topic; (2) participant interaction; (3) disclosure of personal information; (4) breadth of conversation; (5) depth of conversation; and, (6) participant reaction to the discussion. Additionally, retention of participants was noted and researcher's notes and observations noted.

Units of analysis. The unit of measurement in the overall study is the group level (n=8) as each is to be taken as a whole in comparison with each other. In analyzing for group tendencies, individual posts were separated and unitized. From those units, content analysis could be applied using a series of measures, some of which required a rubric.

Transcripts from eight online focus groups were downloaded into Microsoft Word document and word processing software, cleansed of graphics and superfluous text and layout styles, and prepared for analysis. Additionally, post-participation online survey results were downloaded, cleansed and prepared for analysis. The transcripts and survey results were then analyzed in full using a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Qualitative design and treatments

The first part in the triangulation of data was the qualitative analysis of the three treatments (small, medium, large) to ensure each elicited worthwhile and usable data for the client, the school district consortia. The goal of all focus groups is to gather rich data of opinions through group interaction (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Krueger & Casey (2009) echo the desired outcome. "The purpose of conducting a focus group is to listen and gather information … to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product or service" (p. 2). Therefore, it is imperative in comparison to note if each group size variation yielded effective focus group data. If any of the three treatments of group size failed to generate such data, simple deductive reasoning would prove the treatment was a non-functioning group size and could be eliminated from comparison, as it would warrant no further examination in the study. To accomplish this, each of the three treatments were analyzed using a combination of focus group analysis made popular by Krueger, and, more explicitly, through coding and thematic techniques outlined by Miles & Habermann (1994, p. 9) and done using QSR International NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software.

For each focus group size category deemed fruitful and effective, an extensive deeper qualitative analysis was conducted. The following are the areas of deeper qualitative analysis.

Participant reaction to the focus group. Specific open-ended and closed-ended questions on the post-participation survey were constructed to elicit reactions to the online focus group method. These questions were analyzed to see if participant reactions indicated a preference to the group size they were assigned. Additionally, a final question in the focus group discussion centered on direct influence and interaction of fellow participants. The qualitative responses were coded in QSR International NVivo software for analysis. The two survey questions were analyzed qualitatively: Survey question 9 asked: "Explain why you would or wouldn't recommend this type of online follow-up evaluation for future workshops." Survey query 10 read: "Please give us any other comments about your experience in the online discussion format."

The one question embedded in the focus group relating to participant experience online was Question 8 from Day 4: "Considering this online focus group format, to what extent did the online comments of others influence your discussion? After reading what others wrote, did you change your mid about anything or was there a shift or evolution of your thinking?"

These open-ended questions were combined with a statistical analysis of closed-ended Likert scale responses in the same survey mentioned.

Quantitative (experimental) design and treatments

Quantitative methods afford researchers the ability to gather and analyze a great breadth, or wide scope, of the subject matter, as well as depth of a subject. "Quantitative instruments … have the advantage of making it possible to measure the reactions of many respondents to a limited set of questions, thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of the data … " as well as "… permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuances … [they] typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 227).

Participant reactions. Quantitative analysis was applied to survey questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8, which elicited responses using Likert scales. The ratings and responses were given numerical value – some binary (1 and 0) and others on a four-point scale (0-4).

Depth of conversation. Depth of conversation was examined using total word count for the focus group, average word count per participant, and number of posts per participants. Depth in this context would indicate the length of the comments made by individuals.

Breadth of conversation. Breadth of conversation indicates variation or how wide-ranging the opinions or ideas generated are by each focus group. Patton (2010) suggests researchers use "purposeful samples" (p. 248) in their research. Rather than analyze the entire transcript for breadth of conversation, a purposeful sample was chosen to investigate this variable. The data to measure breadth of conversation comes from

Question 5 on Day 2 of each focus group. This question reads: "What could [consortia name], your district, or your school do to make B_____ D_____'s intentions more productive and lasting?" This question was chosen because it implies a listing of responses that can be counted. Additionally, the question is open-ended and does not restrict participant responses to a finite set of answers. The responses to these questions were counted for variation. If two responses centered on the same idea, it was only counted as one variant whereas each unique response would increase the count. In addition to a general count of ideas in a group, the data were averaged to reflect the variation per participant in an effort to offset the impact of the number of participants on idea generation.

Choosing content analysis

Content analysis was chosen as an analytic for this study due to the dynamic constructs of focus groups and the epistolary nature of the focus group transcripts. Content analysis is often used in in-depth analysis of textual content such as that of the transcripts from the focus groups studied herein. Further, focus groups are dynamic. Analyzing discussions does not center on finding one keystone incident, device, individual, or circumstance. In focus groups, the *group* acts as an organism, a concert of factors working in harmony with each other to formulate a performance. As with an orchestra or sporting team, carefully grading the players (key components of the groups in this case) using a scale set to their specific characteristics of excellence gives insight into the overall group functionality. In choosing the content analysis approach, pieces that

make up the whole can be easily broken down, analyzed, and compared to better illuminate elements that factored into degrees of success or failure of the whole.

Content analysis design and treatments

While there is no accepted format for analyzing online focus group data and assigning value, a content analysis approach has been used effectively in online professional community of practice discussion forums (Henri, 1992; Deryakulu & Olkun, 2007) and classroom discussion in online college courses (Hara et al., 2000; Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Rourke & Anderson, 2004).

Drawing on the frameworks set forth by Weber (1990) and Henri (1992) [and enhanced by Rourke & Anderson (2004)], transcripts of online discussions are analyzed using a protocol of steps followed by assigning each participant post in the conversation to a preset value based on Henri's hierarchical values. According to Rourke and Anderson (2004), the steps to developing a theoretically valid protocol for content analysis are: identifying the purpose of the coding data, identifying the behaviors that represent the construct, reviewing the categories and indicators, holding preliminary tryouts, and developing guidelines for administration, scoring, and interpretation of the coding scheme (p. 8). This protocol would be determined prior to the collection of data and would be necessary in laying the ground rules for converting discussion transcripts into quantitative values. Scales of conversation (Krippendorff pp. 136-137) were determined by important constructs of discussion as noted in the literature review.

Adherence to topic. Adherence to topic can best be described as relevance to the discussion. As a purposeful sample, adherence to topic was analyzed using Question 4 on

Day 2, which was phrased: “What are the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop?” Each posting was judged on a three-point rubric for adherence. A score of 0 was entirely off topic; score of 1 was on topic at times, but with some variation of being off topic; and, a score of 2 indicated highly adherent to topic (entirely on topic). These ratings were entered into IBM’s SPSS Statistics 22.0 software for analysis.

Participant interaction. Each interaction in the online focus group can be grouped into two major categories: Response to moderator (R2M) or response to another response (R2R), which would indicate a response to another participant. Another term used in literature to describe interaction is “synergy.” As focus group methodology is greatly dependent on group participation and not on moderator-facilitated discussion alone, R2R was the measure used to count interaction. Simple counts of interactions were entered into SPSS software for analysis. Additionally, interactions were given a content analysis value to indicate levels of “richness” of interaction, a careful consideration indicated as valuable by Krueger & Casey (2009). With richness in mind, a four-point rubric was created and applied to each RTR interaction for a final tally of interaction (called the interaction score) for each participant. The interaction rubric can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Content Analysis: Interaction Scoring Rubric

Score	Participant posts from response-to-response (RTR)
0	No interaction.
1	Low interaction: Simple agreement or disagreement statement. Affirmation.
2	Medium interaction: Asks questions of another participant or seeks clarification. Replies to another participants' query. Extension to the same topic. Uses examples or descriptions in synthesis of another person's.
3	High interaction: Builds upon another person's ideas (amplification). Engages in pointed debate. Extension. New idea or topic.

Disclosure of personal information. The third dependent measure used in the content analysis was disclosure of personal information. Joinson (2001) identified candid self-disclosure as an important cog to online qualitative responses. He found that self-disclosure of others is reciprocated by participants and resulted in disclosing a greater breadth of information about themselves as well as more in-depth reactions (p. 590). In this study, disclosure of personal information was identified as those interactions where a participant identified her/his race or ethnicity, gender, ability, occupation, or related a personal story unique to them or gave examples of their emotional state. The disclosure was counted over the entirety of questions 1-3 on Day 1. Each individual disclosure was noted for each participant and those results were inputted into SPSS Statistics software for analysis. The rubric for disclosure of personal information can been seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Content Analysis: Disclosure of Personal Information Scoring Rubric

Score	Participant posts from Day 1
0	Very little or no personal information given about participant. Information is objective and mostly observational in nature. Information given cannot be traced to an individual's unique experience.
1	Some or subtle disclosure of personal information, such as indication of race/ethnicity, marital status, ability, gender, sexual orientation, job title, or age/years in education. Some disclosure of emotions (but no in-depth description; i.e., "It made me sad" or "I was alarmed by that").
2	Subject directly discloses personal information, such as race/ethnicity, marital status, ability, gender, sexual orientation, job title, or age/years in education; and/or subject gives deep description of a personal story or examples to explain the personal emotions. Subjective in nature.

Statistical analysis

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the quantitative data from the content analysis and word and post counts. MANOVA is a type of multivariate analysis that is used when more than one dependent variable exists at a time and tests hypotheses on the effect of one or more independent variables. MANOVA is preferred over using (in this case) six different ANOVA analyses because conducting multiple ANOVAs dramatically increases the chance of a Type 1 error. The statistical software, SPSS, will be utilized to decrease the chance of researcher error in computing results of the quantitative data.

Survey data from Likert scale responses of participant reactions was also analyzed in SPSS software. Survey responses were analyzed using Pearson's chi-square test of association. Finally, simple descriptive statistics were applied to overall word counts of each group, response to a question about suggesting the online focus group be deployed

in a similar fashion, and a direct question about whether the focus group size was too large, about right-sized, or too small. Survey questions can be seen in Appendix B.

Chapter 4: Results

Today's evaluator must be sophisticated about matching research methods to the nuances of particular evaluation questions and idiosyncrasies of specific stakeholder needs … Such an evaluator is committed to research designs that are relevant, meaningful, understandable, and able to produce useful results that are valid, reliable, and believable.

- Michael Quinn Patton (2002, p. 68)

Participants in online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions share thoughts, feelings, and opinions in an emerging venue for researchers. In looking at participant behaviors and tendencies, we can learn more about the focus groups conducted on the Internet and better inform future researchers about the practice. In this chapter, study findings are reported from the transcripts of participant interactions online as well as how size of the groups affected their experiences.

Quantitative measures in this study included word and posting frequency counts and retention rates. Further qualitative analysis was applied to scores compiled from detailed content analysis categorized as ideas, interactions, disclosure of sensitive information, and adherence to the topic. Data were analyzed in a systemic fashion using the following procedures. First, data were prepared. All raw data were entered into IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for each quantitative measure. Next, data were explored using three statistical test procedures: (1) Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA; (2) Pearson's chi-square test; and, (3) univariate descriptive statistics. MANOVA was the procedure used to analyze content analysis scores and focus group data. Chi-squared was the test used for association on most of the post-discussion survey data. Descriptive statistics were applied to selected survey result data. Additionally, qualitative analysis was conducted on two open-ended post discussion

survey questions and one discussion question from the focus groups themselves. Lastly, researcher's notes were compiled into qualitative findings as well.

Results of the study are organized by research question. The chapter begins with an overview of the participants and focus group makeup, followed by the findings of the online asynchronous focus group discussions themselves. Next, analysis of participant reactions to focus group discussions is presented. The qualitative findings are presented. These relate to depth of conversation, breadth of conversation, adherence to topic, participant interaction, disclosure of personal information, and retention/attrition rates. The final results presented are a synthesis of researcher notes and observations.

Participants

In total, eight four-day focus groups were held online with adults who responded to the invitation, registered, and provided demographic information before participation. Subjects attended one of four different professional development workshops centering on reducing the race-based achievement and discipline gaps or had previous experience in the workshop. Attendance at the four workshops where solicitation for volunteers occurred in person was 267. A total of 103 people volunteered to participate in the focus groups and 84 subjects completed the entire discussion; an 81.6 percent retention rate of subjects. The 18.4 percent attrition rate was near the face-to-face attrition rates spoken about in the literature.

There were 71 females (84.5 percent) and 13 males (15.5 percent) and 28.57 percent were 29 or younger, 20.24 percent were ages 30-39, 30.95 percent were ages 40-49, 15.48 percent were ages 50-59, and 4.76 percent were age 69 or older. The majority

of participants were white (82.1 percent) and teachers (54.8 percent). The range of years in education was from first year through 34 years. Subjects represented 13 different school districts or universities. Some participants had attended the workshop previously. Twenty-three (27.38 percent) had attended the workshop in the past. Of the participants in the focus groups, 55 percent chose to take the workshop offering they were being asked to discuss and 40 percent were required by their employer to attend (but not required to participate in the focus group discussions).

There were 13 females and one male in the small focus groups. Medium focus groups featured 31 females and five males. Large focus groups included 71 females and 13 males.

Focus group sizes

The focus groups were created in the following fashion: Group A was medium with 10 participants; Group B was small with four; Group C was medium with 13; Group D was medium with 13; Group E was small with five; Group F was large with 17; Group G was large with 17, and Group H was small with five. All told, there were 14 participants in three different small groups, 36 in three mediums, and 34 in two large groups.

Focus group findings

The purpose of the online asynchronous focus group discussions was purposed to evaluate a two-day face-to-face educator professional development workshop delivered through a collaborative of school districts. To this charge, the first order of analysis was

to determine if each collection of treatment groups provided adequate data for the client school district.

Each group size delivered adequate information provided enough data to draw effective findings, thus none of the focus group sizes were ineffective. Since each was effective, further analysis of the optimal size for delivering data to researchers was further explored. A qualitative data research analysis software program, QSR International NVivo 10, was used to analyze focus group data for overall findings. The full findings of the focus groups can been seen in Appendix F. Eight significant themes wove throughout each focus group and both an executive summary and full report were delivered in print and presented in person at two different school board meetings. In addition to the eight findings (four positive feedback areas and four negative feedback areas), 10 suggestions emerged for the school district to consider in enhancing, amending, or preparing participants for future workshops.

Participant reactions

Participant reactions gathered through a post-participation online survey conducted using Google Forms were specific to each group, but contained the same closed-ended (Likert scales) and open-ended (written response) questions. Five closed-end responses were analyzed using SPSS software. Two were analyzed with simple descriptive statistics. Two open-ended survey questions and one focus group discussion topic were analyzed for deeper insight into participant reactions.

Descriptive statistics

Univariate descriptive statistics were applied to survey questions relating to group size and subjects' willingness to participate in future online focus group discussions. Eighty-one participants responded to the survey (96.4 percent). All small focus group participants and one who completed only three of the four days of discussion responded to the survey (107.1 percent). In the medium-sized groups, there were 33 survey respondents (91.7 percent) and large groups were represented by 33 respondents (97.1 percent).

Group size. The first question analyzed was: "In terms of the discussion group you participated in, do you feel the group size for effective discussion was "too small", "about right", or "too large"? The results of the question are seen in Table 5. Nearly half of the small group participants said the small groups were too small (46.7 percent). The majority of medium and large group responses indicated they felt the size of the group was about right (84.8 percent of respondents in both medium and large groups). As group size increased, so too did the percentage of respondents who felt the group was too large. Only one small group participant responded that her/his group was too large while 9.1 percent of medium group respondents said their group was too large. In large groups 15.2 percent of respondents indicated their group was too large.

Table 5

Survey Responses Regarding Group Size

Responses to survey question 1: Do you feel the group size was:							
Focus group	n	Too large	%	About right	%	Too small	%
Small	15	1	6.7	7	46.7	7	46.7
Medium	33	3	9.1	28	84.8	2	6.1
Large	33	5	15.2	28	84.8	0	0.0

Online focus group recommendation. Participants were surveyed to see if they would recommend a similar online asynchronous text-based focus group discussion for future workshop attendees. Question 8 on the survey read: "Would you recommend this type of online follow-up evaluation (online focus group discussion) for future workshops. Possible answers were either "yes" or "no." Of the 81 responses, 79 responded "yes" (97.5 percent). The two respondents who responded "no" were both small group participants (13.3 percent).

Pearson's chi-square: Analysis of participant survey responses

The chi-square test for independence, also called Pearson's chi-square test or the chi-square test of association, is used to discover if there is a relationship between two categorical variables. Five questions from the online survey were analyzed using chi-square. These questions asked participants to report the amount of time they spent in the focus group discussions, the extent of adequate opportunity to express themselves, their level of engagement, the extent of participants' honesty, and the extent to which they felt others interacted with their posts. Dependent variables were group size (small, medium, large) and independent variables were each of the responses to the five questions (Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6). The responses to the question regarding amount of time spent, respondents used a drop-down menu of options to record hours and minutes. Minutes

were used in the statistical analysis in chi-square. Responses to the other four questions were quantified by assigning a value to each of four possible responses. A zero value was given a response of "Not at all." A score of 1 was assigned to responses of "To a slight extent." A score of 2 was assigned responses of "To a moderate extent." A score of 3 was assigned to responses of "To a great extent."

Question 5 (extent you and others were truthful and honest in your responses) was the only one of the five areas of analysis that showed significant statistical difference between the groups. Question 5 had a p-value of .048 (.05 showing significant statistical difference) and a chi-square (X^2) of 9.581. Medium groups responded at a much greater rate that participants were being truthful and honest (84.8 percent for medium groups compared to 69.7 percent for large and 53.3 percent for small groups). Meanwhile, 13.3 percent of small group participants responded that participants were only slightly truthful or honest (compared to 0 percent of large group members and 3 percent of medium group members).

No significant variation in responses was found in time reported, adequate opportunities to express oneself, nor engagement of the participant or others. See Table 6 for the chi-square results.

Table 6

Chi-Square: Participant Responses to Post-Discussion Survey Questions

		Question 2 Total time spent responding and reading	Question 3 Adequate opportunity to express yourself?				Question 4 How engaged were you in the online discussion?				Question 5 Extent you and others were truthful and honest				Question 6 Extent others read and engaged with your responses			
		See graph below	*No*	*SE*	*ME*	*GE*	*No*	*SE*	*ME*	*GE*	*No*	*SE*	*ME*	*GE*	*No*	*SE*	*ME*	*GE*
Large	n	-	0	1	8	24	0	5	20	8	0	0	10	23	1	15	15	2
	%	-	0.0	3.0	24.2	72.7	0.0	15.2	60.6	24.2	0.0	0.0	30.3	69.7	3.0	45.5	45.5	6.1
Medium	n	-	0	0	10	23	0	3	21	9	0	1	4	28	3	14	16	0
	%	-	0.0	0.0	30.3	69.7	0.0	9.1	63.6	27.3	0.0	3.0	12.1	84.8	9.1	42.4	48.5	0.0
Small	n	-	0	2	7	6	0	3	7	5	0	2	5	8	3	6	4	2
	%	-	0.0	13.3	30.9	40.0	0.0	29.0	46.7	33.3	0.0	13.3	33.3	53.3	20.0	40.0	26.7	13.3
Total	n	-	0	3	25	53	0	11	48	22	0	3	19	59	7	35	35	4
	%	-	0.0	3.7	30.9	65.4	0.0	13.6	59.3	27.2	0.0	3.7	23.5	72.8	8.6	43.2	43.2	4.9
χ2		48.297	8.547				1.837				9.581				8.584			
p-value		0.542	0.073				0.766				.048*				0.198			

Note: * = p < .05 Key: No="Not at all"; SE="To a slight extent"; ME="To a moderate extent"; GE="To a great extent"
Values: Numberical values were assigned for the purpose of analysis (0="Not at all"; 1="To a slight extent"; 2="To a moderate extent"; 3="To a great extent")

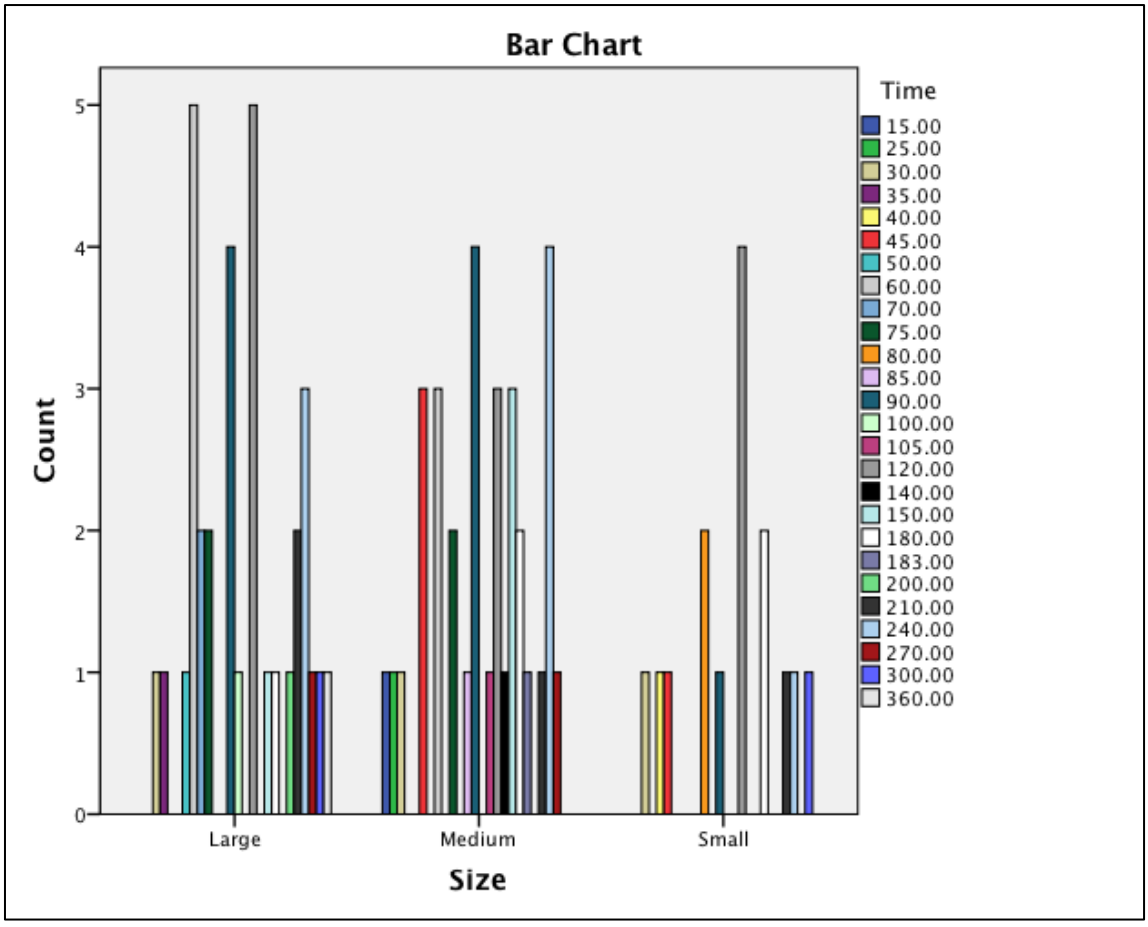


Figure 3: Amount of time reported in focus group discussions.

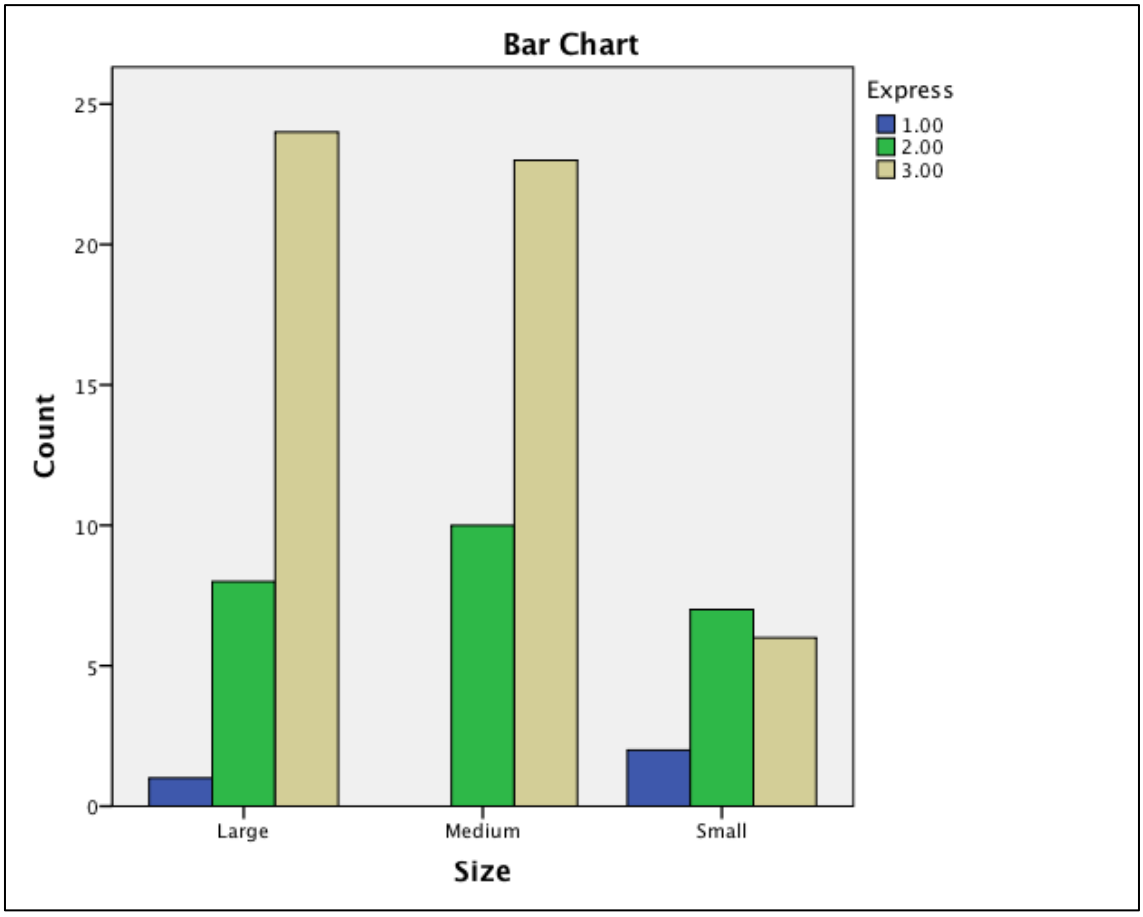


Figure 4: Did respondents have adequate opportunity to express themselves?

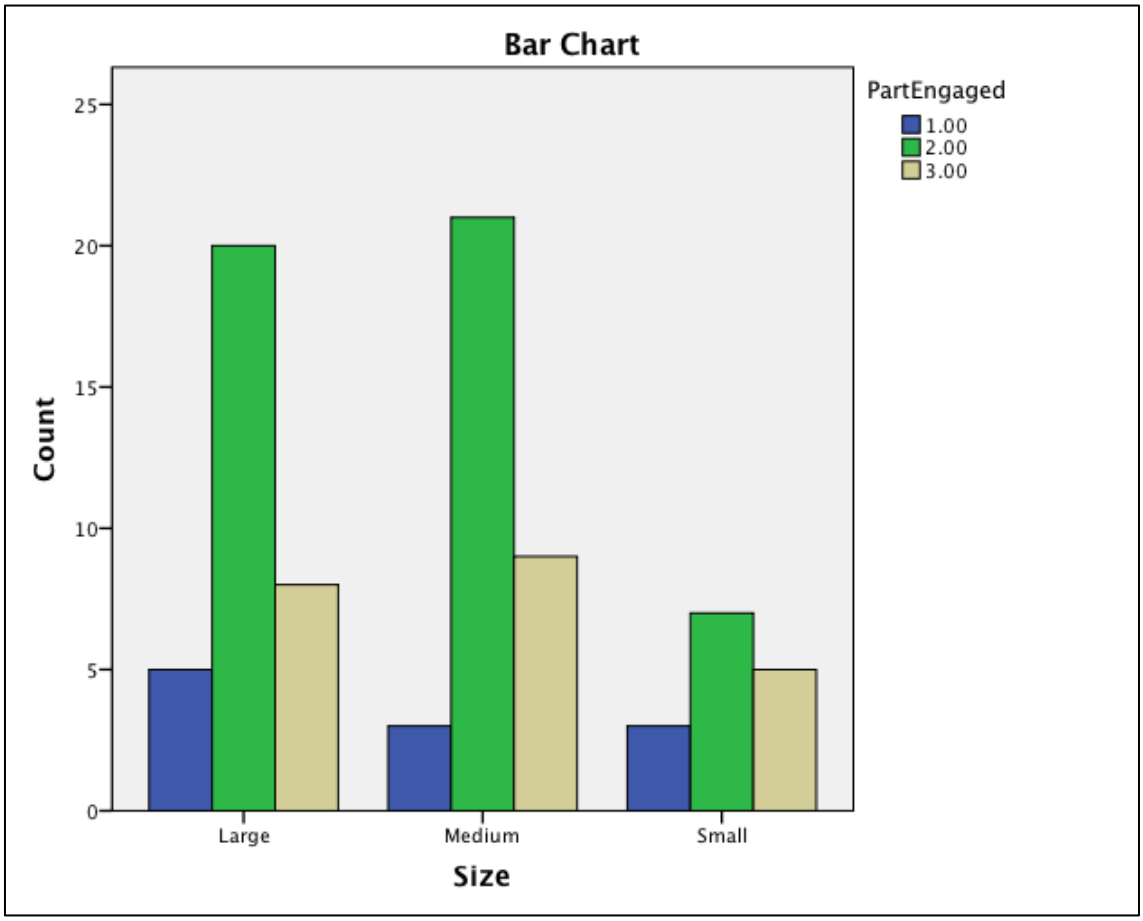


Figure 5: How engaged or involved in online discussion?

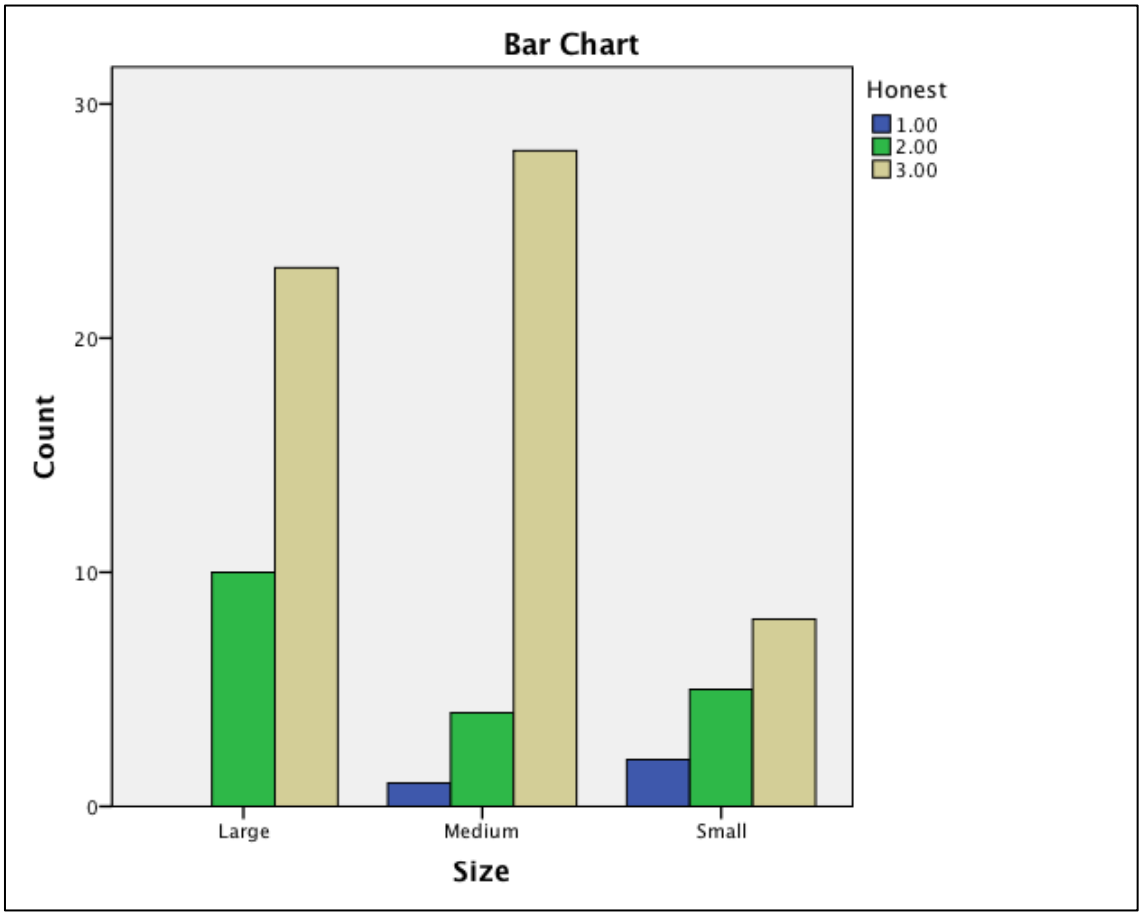


Figure 6: To what extent were participants truthful and honest?

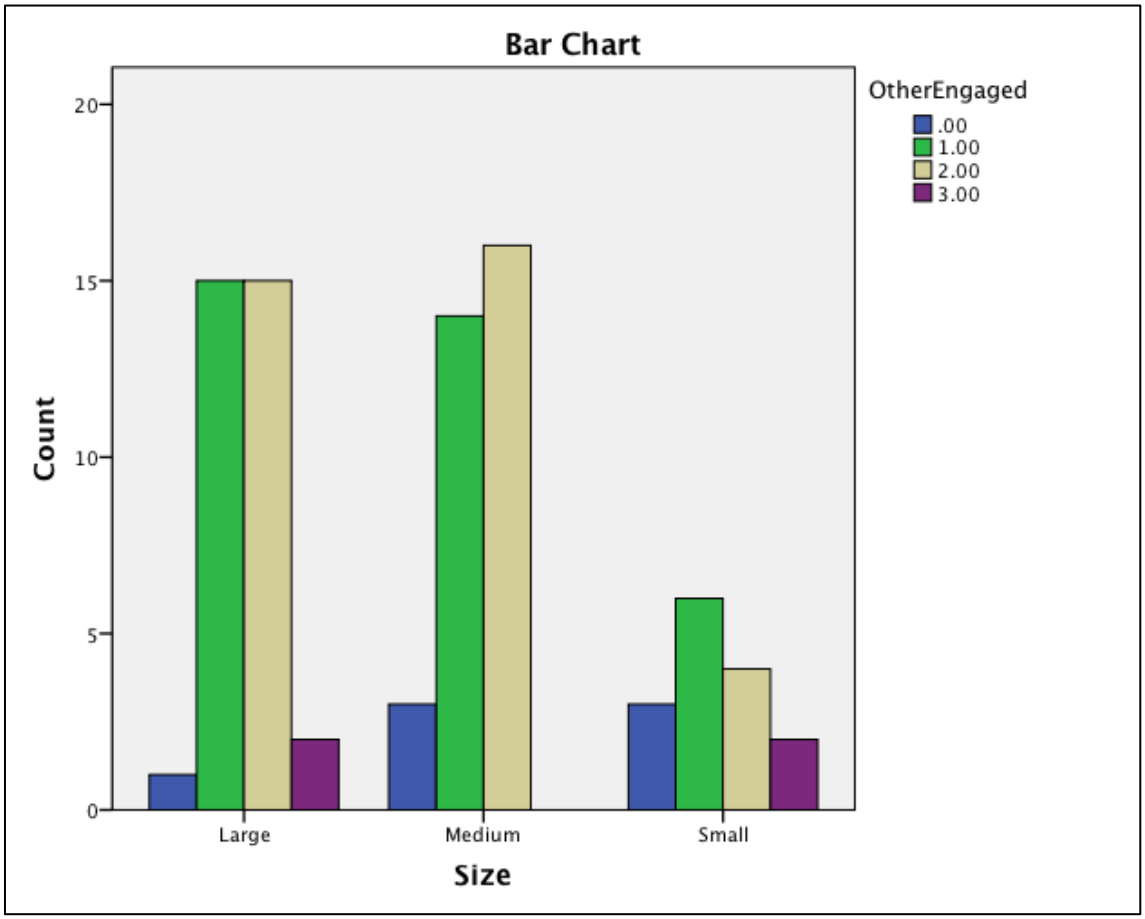


Figure 7: To what extent were others engaged with your posts and comments?

Qualitative analysis of participant reactions

Qualitative analysis of two open-ended survey questions and one focus group discussion question were analyzed using NVivo 10 software. Eleven significant themes (e.g. "codes") emerged with three major significant findings toward determining optimal group size in online asynchronous text-based focus groups. These are discussed with examples from each finding.

Qualitative finding #1: All group sizes reported positive feelings toward the online discussion. Size did not change the depth or breadth of comments centering

around the participants' willingness to have an online conversation. In each group size, a theme throughout the open-ended survey responses as well as the final discussion point were that subjects felt the online discussions promoted safety, honesty, and overall enjoyment. For instance, one survey response from a large group wrote: "I feel this was a great way to expand my thinking and experiences related to the training and the information covered. It was certainly worth the time I put into it." Additionally, a small group participant wrote in the Day 4, Question 8 posting: "This type of discussion allows me to be honest as well as has provide [sic] a different viewpoint that isn't skewed by knowing who said it" (Lake Wabedo, April 17, 2014). In a February 6, 2014 posting, a medium-size-group participant spoke of the value of interaction in the online environment. "I wasn't so much moved or persuaded by the comments of others. I was, however, validated when I saw that I had agreed with so many of the comments … So I guess the comments of others encouraged me to post what I had been feeling over the past week," Lake Itasca wrote.

In addition to positive feelings throughout the groups, no discernable difference emerged in qualitative analysis in regard to how individuals went about the duties of participation. A theme for nearly every participant who wrote to the point stated they would read the daily questions and craft a response prior to reading other posts. If the participant did go back and interact with another discussant, it was after posting. In group A, a medium-sized group, Lake Phalen explained: "I too wrote my comments before looking at others. I wanted to come in with my own thoughts and not have them swayed by the tenor of the conversation that had come before" (February 2, 2014).

Qualitative finding #2: Small groups are too small for effective discussion.

Groups in the small category ranged in size from four to five participants. According to participants, that size was not adequately large enough to stimulate discussion throughout the day. Small group participants lamented the lack of interaction throughout the day. In a survey response, a small group participant wrote: "More comments would have been better along with more interaction." Another survey respondent specifically pointed out to the logistics of having only a handful of participants in a four-day-long online asynchronous focus group. "Also, I feel frustration, because I was the only one that posted early and completed the requirements and some people were coming in to the discussion late …" This thread ran throughout the survey responses for small group participants. One even spoke directly to increasing the group size.

> I was surprised by how few people there were in the group. You are the researcher, so I'm sure that there is a reason as to why it was so small. However, I think the group size could have doubled … which is why I think that so many people did the bare minimum (including myself, for the most part).

A short discussion thread worked its way into a small group discussion on March 6, 2014 wherein three participants (Lake of the Woods, Big Sandy Lake, and Maple Lake) discussed ways to change the posting/response timing of the discussion to better encourage interaction in small groups. This exemplified a theme of responses when group size came up with small group participants. "I think someone should have to post by 3:00 or so…so people would be able to post in the evening … Then it would be, I feel a better conversation," Lake of the Woods wrote.

Qualitative finding #3: Large group participants found discussions overwhelming. As focus group participants increased in size, workload increased. The largest of the groups had a higher rate of written responses addressing issues of being overwhelmed by the task at hand. "The format was a little tricky," one large-group survey response read. "It was sometimes difficult and overwhelming to me to see all of the comments on one page, especially if I did not get a chance to log in until later in the afternoon and there could be 40 new comments to page through." Similar to the ways small group participants began brainstorming for possible solutions to their posting issues, large group discussants began tossing ideas for minimizing cognitive overload in their discussions. A few suggested a system of utilizing hash tags or categories for participants to choose which posts to read. Others admitted the workload affected their decision to post or not.

"I like the online focus group format," Bear Island Lake wrote in large group G on April 17, 2014, "although it could be very time-consuming to read everything written and decide whether to respond or not." This post sparked a series of interactions in which participants of that focus group spoke about the large group size. This interaction is presented in its natural format, as called for by focus group researcher Kitzinger (1994). Kitzinger urges focus group reports to show some of the interaction as it unfolds. See Figure 8 for a screen shot of the interaction.

Figure 8: Screenshot of online focus group interaction.

Content analysis

MANOVA. Content analysis of the transcripts was conducted, results compiled, and numerical data entered in to SPSS software for statistical analysis using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Data entered included word count by participant, posts by participant, number of ideas generated per group, interaction with other participants by

individual, a rating of interaction by each participant, disclosure of sensitive information, and adherence to topic by each participant. Additionally, group retention rates were analyzed to investigate whether attrition (drop out) rates increased in any of the treatment sizes. For word counts, posts were coded by group name, group size, and participant pseudonym.

Data gathered were entered into SPSS and between-subjects factors were analyzed. There were three groups: small (N=14), medium (N=36), and large (N=34). The Wilk's Lambda multivariate test returned an F value of 12.212 with a level of significance at .000*** ($p < .001$), which indicates significant statistical differences exist between the three groups (S, M, L). Once Wilk's Lamba was passed, I looked at each variable to determine where the differences among group existed.

Post hoc tests. I ran both Tukey and Scheffe post hoc tests to verify the credibility of the MANOVA findings. Both Scheffe (more strict) and Tukey verified the results of the MANOVA.

MANOVA analysis found two areas of significant difference between variables: retention rates and number of ideas generated (i.e., "breadth of discussion"). Table 7 shows a summary of the MANOVA findings.

Table 7

Summary of MANOVA on the Group Characteristics by Group Size

Dependent variable	Source	*Type III Sum of Squares (SS)*	*Degrees of Freedom (df)*	*Mean Square (MS)*	*Multivariate F-value (F)*
Post count	Group size	37.153	2	18.577	0.870
	Error	1728.847	81	21.344	
	Total	7142.000	84		
Word count	Group size	127392.828	2	63696.414	0.240
	Error	21462358.700	81	264967.392	
	Total	99036795.000	84		
Ideas	Group size	342.159	2	171.079	314.375*
	Error	44.079	81	0.544	
	Total	10072.000	84		
Participant interaction (RTR)	Group size	33.225	2	16.612	0.755
	Error	1782.811	81	22.010	
	Total	3827.000	84		
Interaction score	Group size	197.355	2	98.677	1.240
	Error	1782.811	81	22.010	
	Total	13217.000	84		
Disclosure of sensitive information	Group size	0.963	2	0.481	0.995
	Error	39.180	81	0.484	
	Total	164.000	84		
Adherence to topic	Group size	493.359	2	246.679	1.530
	Error	13060.000	81	161.238	
	Total	784680.115	84		
Retention	Group size	3711.588	2	1855.792	67.895*
	Error	2214.010	81	27.333	
	Total	580100.276	84		

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Depth of discussion. Number of words in an overall discussion was the measure of depth of discussion. The first three days of each focus group were examined to measure number of words in a discussion. The fourth day of discussion was dropped because the final day has been known to drop in interaction and participation and may throw a confounding variable into any measurement of discussion (Hatten & Christensen,

2013). To measure depth of discussion, each individual focus group was measured independent of one another. In each focus group, moderator postings were deleted and all other extraneous information removed. Days 1, 2, and 3 were combined into one file in Microsoft Word. These words represented every word typed in by focus group participants from Day 1 through Day 3. The total was tallied. For further examination, word counts were divided by the number of participants resulting in an average word count per participant.

All told, 96,674 words were entered by participants (n=84) in the eight different focus group discussions. Small group participants wrote 18,304 words (1,220.27 average), medium participants entered 37,097 words (1,091.09 average), and large group members responded with 41,273 words (1,213.92 per person). Further examination of these totals occurs in the MANOVA analysis.

The MANOVA analysis found no significant statistical difference between groups in terms of total posts ($p = 0.423$) or word counts ($p = 0.707$).

Retention and attrition. Attrition rates were analyzed using sign-up vs. total completed participants. Participation was judged on criteria of successfully logging in an posting in each of the four days of the discussion. Partial participation (e.g. participant completed the first two days, but did not return to the discussion) was considered a drop out. Total attrition for the online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions was 18.4 percent (84 completed out of 103 registrants). An 84.5 percent retention rate is conducive to studies done on retention/attrition rates on face-to-face focus groups.

There was a significant difference between groups with respect to retention rates, with a p-value of .000 ($p < .001$). Further examination of the retention rates shows a higher rate of attrition for the small group (68.67 percent retention rate) than the medium (87.84 percent) and large (82.98 percent) groups. See Figure 9 for a graph of the differences in participants retained per group.

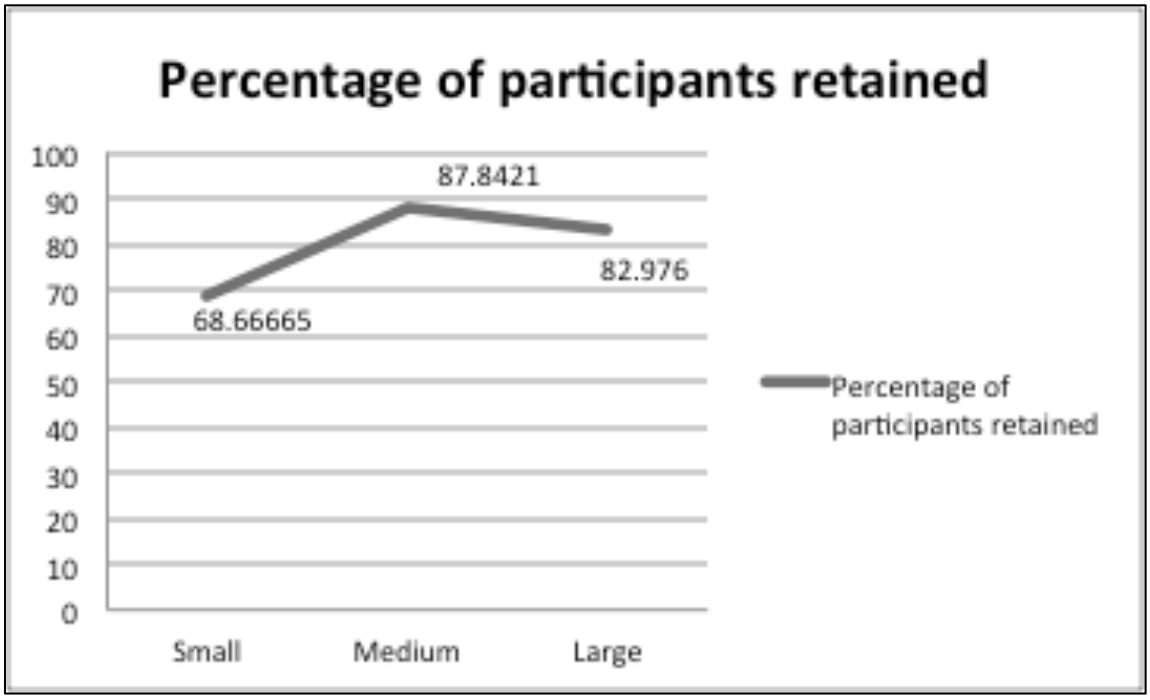


Figure 9: Variation between groups in participant retention.

Ideas. The breadth of the discussion – or the variety of the discussion paths – was measured by looking at the second question of the Day 2 (responses to Question 5): "What could _____, your district, or your school do after (or before) the workshop to make B_____ D_____'s intentions more productive and lasting?" This listing or brainstorming-type question is a good place to look at diversity of responses. While many

of the suggestions from the brainstorming would be redundant (having reached "saturation"), the question was specifically designed to elicit a breadth of responses. These responses were easily quantified by a simple count of unique ideas that came from the responses.

Each focus group transcript was studied independently. For instance, Focus Group A was counted to see how many different ideas surfaced. Then, Group B was counted for unique ideas (to only Group B – not in relation to Group A's topics). In all, 26 unique ideas were presented by all the groups, with Group G, a large-sized group, generating the most with 13 ideas. Two small groups (Groups E and H) generated the fewest ideas). See Table 8 for a breakdown of ideas generated by group.

Table 8

Number of Ideas Generated from Question 5, Day 2

Idea or topic	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Site- or district-level discussion(s)/debriefing(s)/follow-up	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Electronic feedback/needs analysis for targeted follow-up	x							
Required for all teachers/staff to attend	x		x	x	x	x	x	
Parents, community members, and/or school board should attend	x		x					
Certificate or more advanced classes	x			x			x	
Make BD pre-requisite for other courses	x						x	
Online discussion board like this (moderated online discussion)	x		x		x	x	x	x
Get more people of color to attend	x					x		
More support and/or leadership from school and district overall	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Interdistrict cohort groups	x		x	x	x			
Add components of BD into teacher evaluations/action plans	x			x		x		
All non-tenured should be required to take it	x					x	x	
PEG should give out how to integrate into your school information		x	x	x				
To-do list for each participant		x						
Speaker to come to own school and be specific about district issues or all members of a staff attend together		x	x			x	x	x
Schools should send district-specific data to analyze in BD		x	x					
Give a list of ideas to participants or send "tools" or lesson plans/ideas with them		x	x	x		x		x
Book study group, documentary, or speaker comes to school			x		x		x	
Prior to workshop, send out reading materials; packet of info; testimonials				x	x	x	x	x
Prior to workshop, let participants know they will have homework				x				
Non-teaching personnel-only follow up				x				
Post-workshop reading list						x		
Statement from the workshop leaders re: emotional nature of w/s							x	
WMEP newsletter/e-Newsletter							x	
Beyond Diversity retreat for those who wish to attend one							x	
Total (26 unique ideas presented overall)	12	7	11	11	6	11	13	6

MANOVA analysis found that there was a significant difference in breadth of discussion (e.g., ideas generated) between groups. Ideas had an F-value of 314.375 and a p-value of .000 ($p < .001$). Further examinations of breadth of discussion data show the small groups generated an average of 6.29 ideas, the medium groups 11.28 and the large groups 12.00. The gap between the small group average and medium and large groups had greater range than that between the medium and large groups. Each of the three was statistically significant, however as a larger disparity existed between the small group and combination of medium and large groups, the practical (or "clinical") significance is

slight between medium (standard deviation of 0.45426) and large groups (standard deviation of 1.01504). See Figure 10 for number of ideas differences by group size.

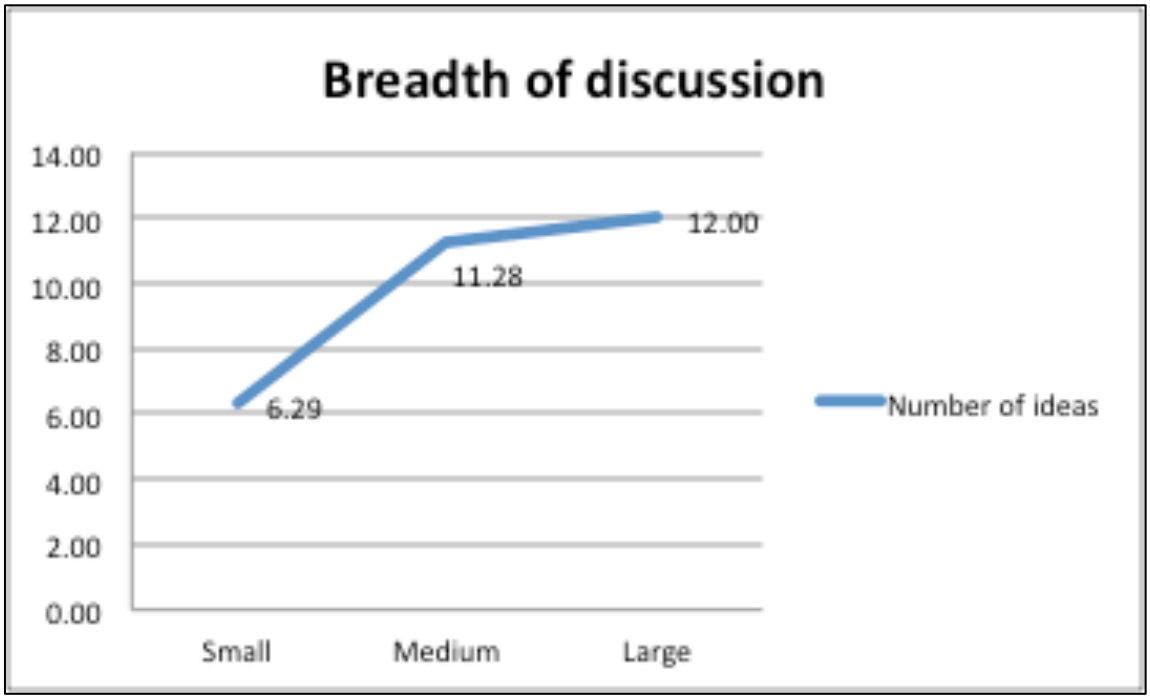


Figure 10: Variation between groups in breadth of discussion.

Participant interaction. Assigning an interaction score of 0-3 for each posting generated participant interaction scores. Interactions were only considered as those that were response to responses – in other words, interactions with other participants, not those in response to the day's question as posted by the moderator and not those that are in direct response to a moderator query. No statistical significance was found between groups in the area of total interactions or interaction scores. Interactions had a p-value of 0.473 and interaction scores had a p-value of 0.295. Figure 11 shows boxplot graphical

depictions of the distribution of interactions and Figure 12 shows boxplots of interaction scores.

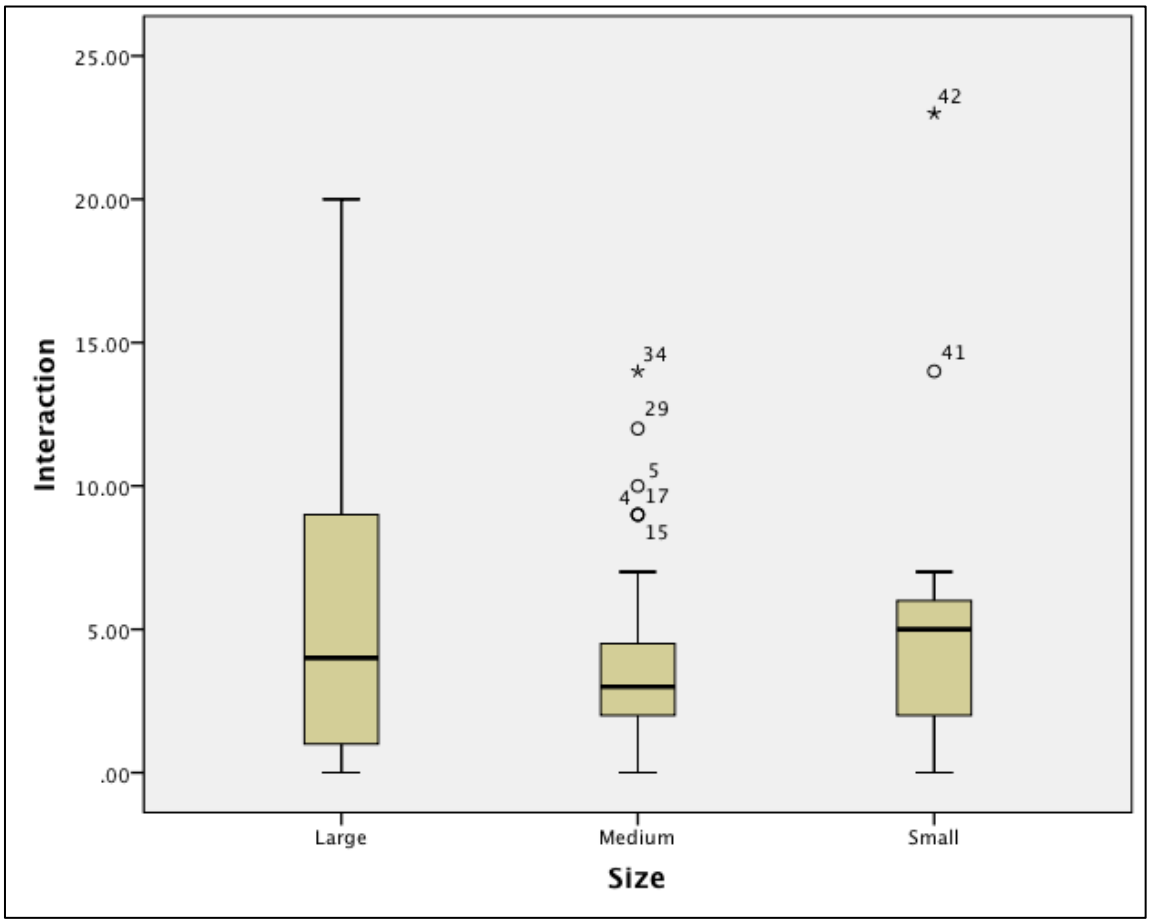


Figure 11: Boxplot graphics of interaction distribution.

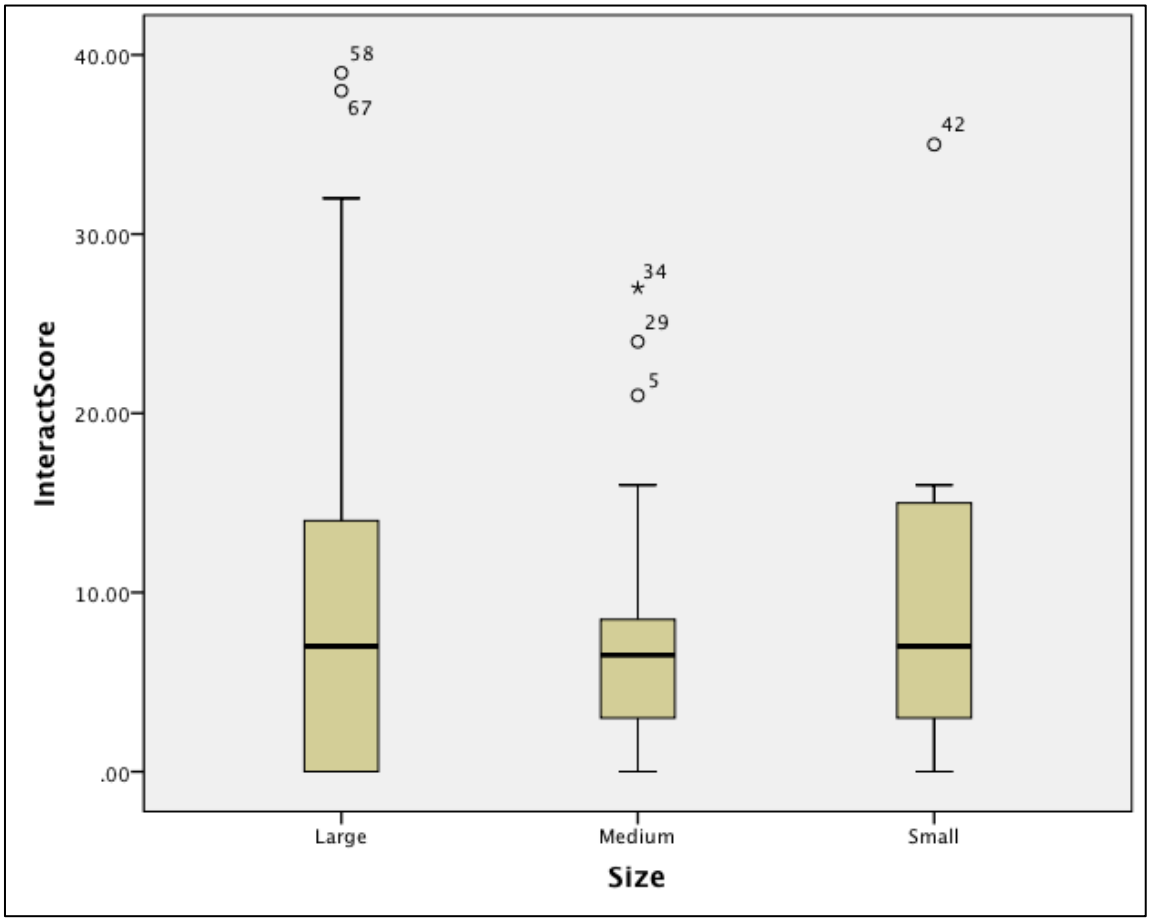


Figure 12: Boxplot graphics of interaction score distribution.

With an abundance of upper scale outliers in the range, I eliminated the outliers to see if it would affect distribution. Figure 13 shows the results of distribution of interaction counts with outliers removed.

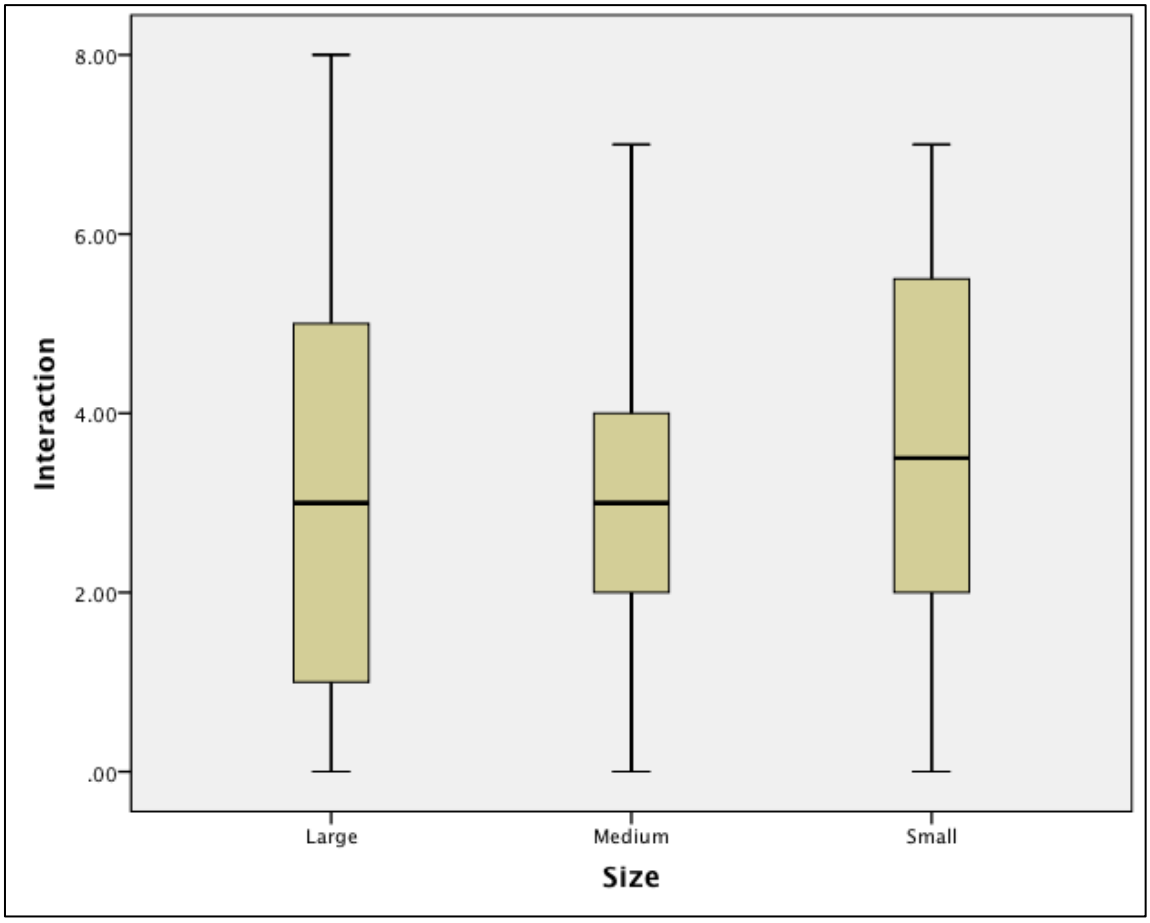


Figure 13: Boxplot graphics of interaction distribution with outliers removed.

Again, with interaction scores, upper end outliers were removed to check for changes in distribution. Figure 14 shows the boxplots of interaction scores with all outliers removed. However, with outliers removed, the MANOVA analysis still found no statistical significance between groups for interactions or interaction scores.

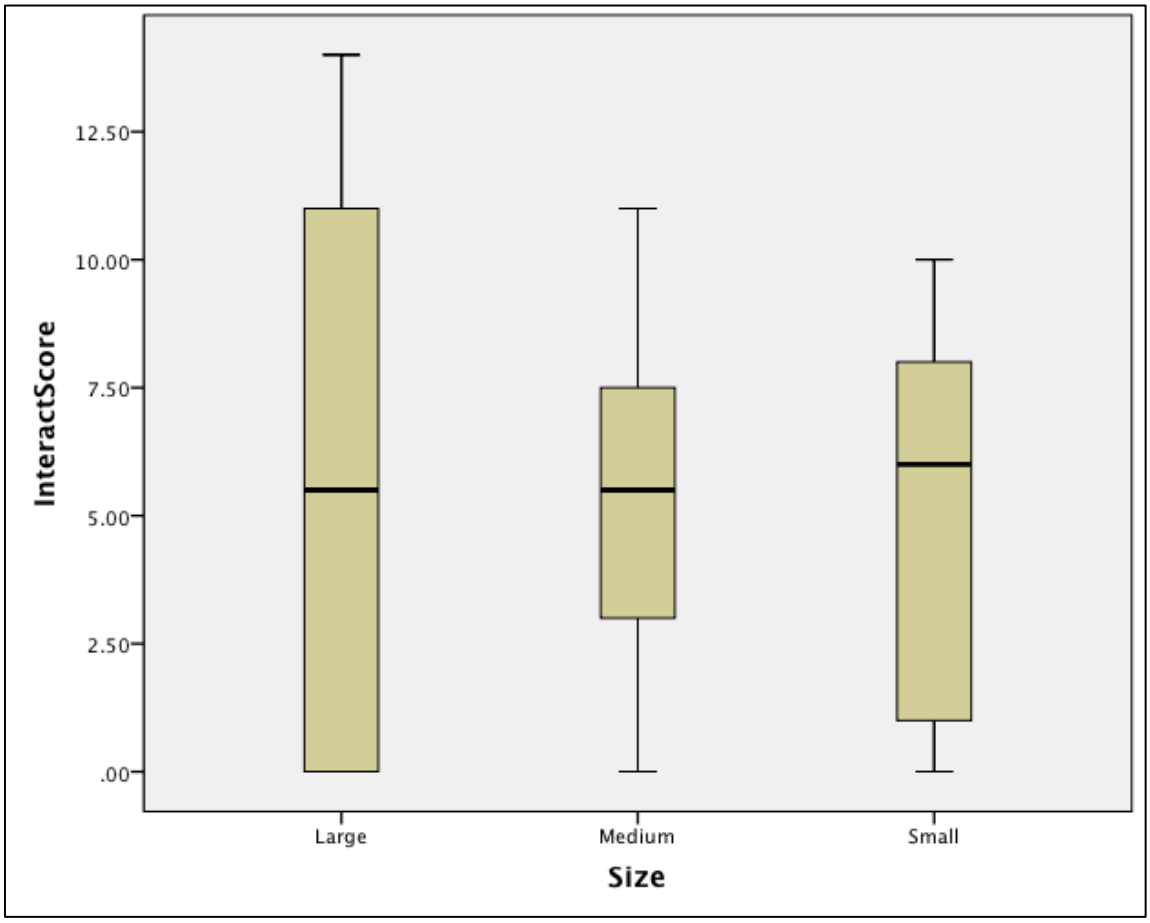


Figure 14: Boxplot graphics of interaction score distribution with outliers removed.

Adherence to topic. Posts were judged on a binary scale of 0 and 1 for being on-topic (1) or off-topic (2). These totals are included for each participant in the MANOVA analysis. Overwhelmingly, participants stayed on topic in all three groups. Very few tangential discussions sprouted up and no observable patterns emerged from the small amount that did. Even when a posting drifted off topic, it was connected to the discussion at hand. Nothing appeared that was entirely moot.

With so few non sequitur discussions, no discernable differences between any of the treatments could be concluded. In the smattering of text that lacked adherence,

however, polemic subject matter was most often the trigger a participant's off-topic remark. According to previous studies, adhering to topic in asynchronous online discussion is commonplace, often attributed to an increase in time to think through the questions and craft a response. Small group adherence was 91.9 percent, medium participants adhered to topic at 94.8 percent, and large groups had a 98.5 adherence to topic percentage.

Disclosure of sensitive information. Posts from Day 1 discussions were analyzed for disclosure of personal and sensitive information. Individuals were scored based on all of their posts from Day 1, with a score of 0 indicating no disclosure of sensitive information, 1 a moderate level, and 2 a high level of personal disclosure. No significant differences between groups were discerned for disclosure of sensitive or personal information (F-score of 0.995 and p-value of 0.374). Small groups had the highest average of sensitive disclosure scores with 1.4286. Medium groups had an average disclosure score of 1.2222 and large scored an average of 1.1176.

Researcher observations

A final data source is the researcher notes. The positionality of a researcher should be carefully noted in any qualitative study (Cresswell, 2003). In addition to designing the research study, recruiting participants, and analyzing data, I also acted as moderator and technical support (web designer and developer) for this dissertation. As such, I took notes along the way, all with careful notice of the effects of group size, trends, issues, and work load. Notes were recorded in a researcher-only password-

protected portion of the Moodle website. These observations were recorded simultaneously with recruitment, creation, and moderating/facilitating activities.

Researcher observation #1: Groups of fewer than six participants are too small to be effective. I wrote on Friday, February 28, 2014: "It appears the smaller the group, the less interaction, but mostly because if you have two early morning people, they may not return to the discussion. For instance, the small group may be like this:

- 2 early morning (post within 1 hour of question being raised)
- 1 late morning/lunch
- 2 evening

The morning people may not be returning or return to see nothing updated and don't return until the following early morning. If this happens, the interaction is less in the smallest of groups."

With all three of the small groups, interaction was at a distinct disadvantage because one or two lagging participants (those who posted late) would create a discussion void. Additionally, the smaller the group the more tenuous attrition becomes. If six participants are registered for a small group and two drop out (as happened with Group B), discussion suddenly becomes quite limited. While small groups are easier to set up and maintain, the lack of interaction was consistently in my notes as a major downfall when compared to the medium and large groups.

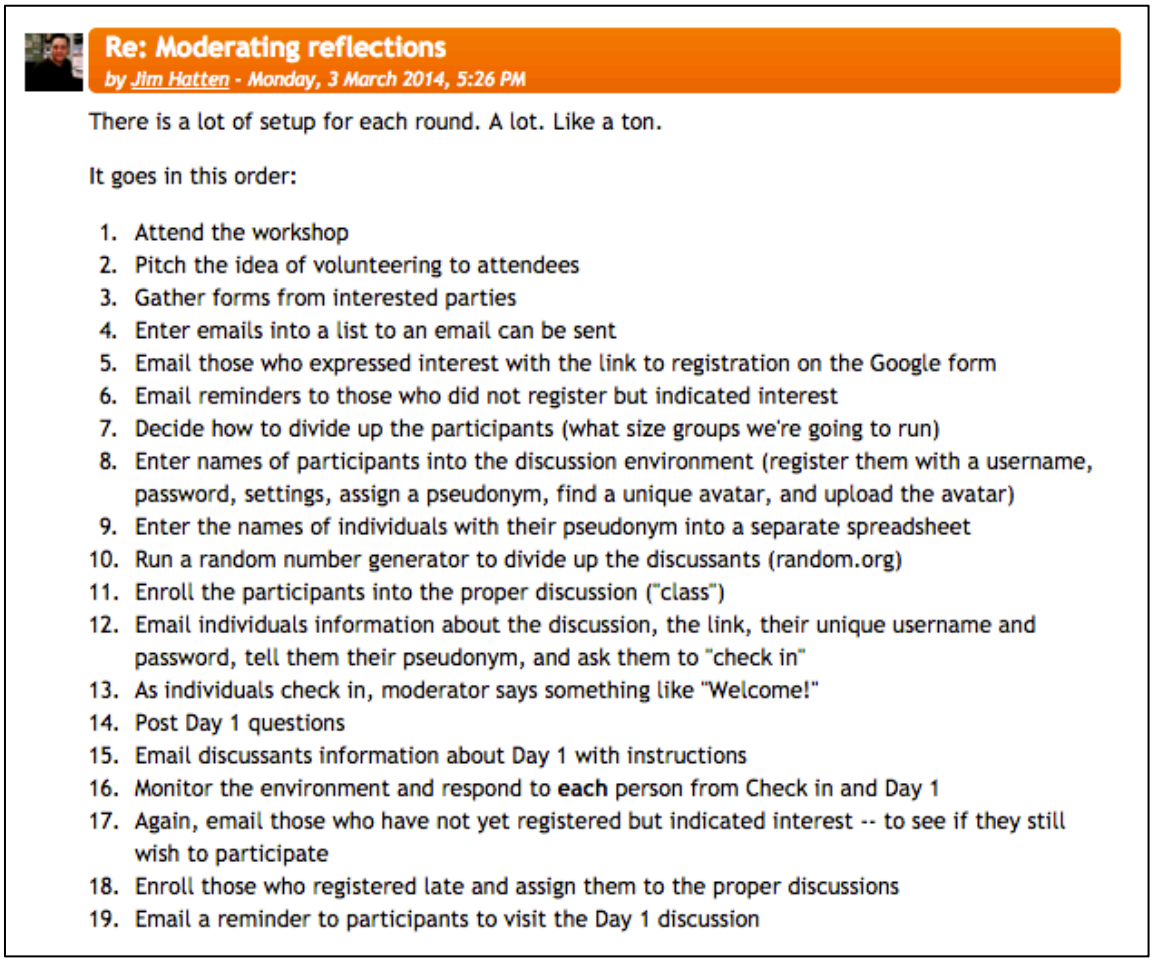
Researcher observation #2: Large and medium groups yield a similar amount of data. As focus groups were underway, it appeared as if the difference in participants from a group size of 10 to a group size of 15 didn't result in a similar 66.7

percent increase in ideas, discussion topics, or insight into the workshops. On Tuesday, March 18, 2014, I wrote of this issue: “It appears the larger the group, the more variety of posts and therefore a little more interaction, but overall many people are posting and not conversing. Perhaps a way to look at this would be the percentage of interaction on a given question per treatment size (I suspect the interaction -- response to responses -- is about the same percentage).” Later in that same day I returned to record some more notes in respect to medium vs. large groups. I wrote:

> “MOST IMPORTANT!!!!!!! The redundancies for using a large group are high (Much of the posting is, in fact, redundant). Therefore, the "voices" are being heard many times. These are often the same "voices" (opinions) and the additional opinions aren't necessarily sparking deeper opinions or "voices" to come out. In other words: it is much more work, much harder to mediate, and participants report less satisfaction in participating in a larger group, but the result is roughly the same findings (mosaic of answers is the same) as a much smaller group. This is how I feel. This is a moderator note, only. However, it is MY belief that I'd rather run a smaller discussion with more interaction and get, at the very least, the same results.”

Researcher observation #3: As group size increases, moderator/researcher workload increases almost exponentially. The last researcher observation speaks to the practicality of running a larger focus group online. The process of gathering data in an online asynchronous environment requires a great deal of data entry, discussion monitoring (as a moderator), attending to technical issues, sending out correspondences,

and general management of participants. An example of this is my note about setting up for Day 1 discussions written on March 3, 2014 (see Figure 15).



Re: Moderating reflections

by Jim Hatten - Monday, 3 March 2014, 5:26 PM

There is a lot of setup for each round. A lot. Like a ton.

It goes in this order:

1. Attend the workshop
2. Pitch the idea of volunteering to attendees
3. Gather forms from interested parties
4. Enter emails into a list to an email can be sent
5. Email those who expressed interest with the link to registration on the Google form
6. Email reminders to those who did not register but indicated interest
7. Decide how to divide up the participants (what size groups we're going to run)
8. Enter names of participants into the discussion environment (register them with a username, password, settings, assign a pseudonym, find a unique avatar, and upload the avatar)
9. Enter the names of individuals with their pseudonym into a separate spreadsheet
10. Run a random number generator to divide up the discussants (random.org)
11. Enroll the participants into the proper discussion ("class")
12. Email individuals information about the discussion, the link, their unique username and password, tell them their pseudonym, and ask them to "check in"
13. As individuals check in, moderator says something like "Welcome!"
14. Post Day 1 questions
15. Email discussants information about Day 1 with instructions
16. Monitor the environment and respond to **each** person from Check in and Day 1
17. Again, email those who have not yet registered but indicated interest -- to see if they still wish to participate
18. Enroll those who registered late and assign them to the proper discussions
19. Email a reminder to participants to visit the Day 1 discussion

Figure 15: Screen capture of researcher notes where he reflects on necessary tasks.

Later, I recorded my time commitment as I moderated a large group discussion. The telling part of my reflections regarding focus groups of 15 or larger is in the continual description of how difficult they are to manage and how time-consuming it is for the moderator. These notes are shown in Figure 16.

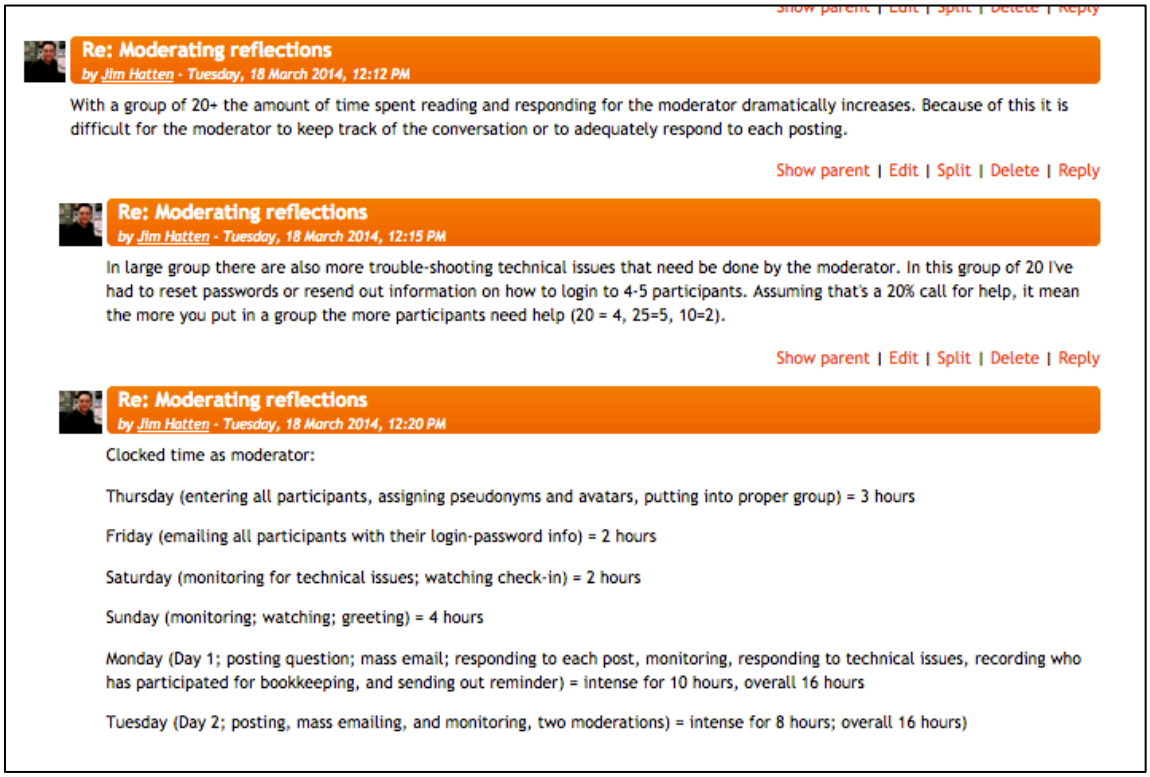


Figure 16: Screen shot of researcher notes depicting comments about the time-consuming nature of moderating larger groups.

In triangulating quantitative data, content analysis, and qualitative components, results of this study not only show certain tendencies of group sizes in online asynchronous focus group discussions, but illuminate them as well. The triangulation is also helpful to establishing validity and reliability of findings. In this study, two trends emerged from each of the data. First, all indicators show the small group lags behind other group sizes in statistical relevance, participant satisfaction, and researcher observation. Secondly, large groups can be overwhelming to participant and moderator, yet yield very little significant benefit to the researcher.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.
- Ernest Hemingway

The goal of this study was to determine an optimal size for online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions. This chapter begins with a report of the study findings organized by research question, followed by limitations of the study. Next, potential implications for the designing of online focus group discussions are outlined as well as recommendations for future research on online focus group discussions.

The research questions that outlined this dissertation study were:

1. What is the optimal size for online asynchronous test-based focus group discussions?
2. Does a small, medium, or large online asynchronous text-based focus group yield greater adherence to the topic being discussed for participants?
3. Is there higher participant interaction in small, medium, or large online asynchronous text-based focus group?
4. Is disclosure of personal information more prevalent in small, medium, or large online asynchronous text-based focus groups?
5. Does depth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as depth of conversation as in the medium group? Does depth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as depth of conversation as in the large group? Does depth of conversation in the medium group yield as high a usage as depth of conversation as in the large group?

6. Does breadth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as breadth of conversation as in the medium group? Does breadth of conversation in the small group yield as high a usage as breadth of conversation as in the large group? Does breadth of conversation in the medium group yield as high a usage as breadth of conversation as in the large group?
7. How do survey responses and open-ended focus group question responses with participants help to explain any quantitative differences in discussions between small, medium, and large sized online asynchronous focus group discussions?

Online asynchronous focus groups are found to be an effective format for gathering qualitative data for social science research (Burton & Goldsmith, 2002; Schneider et al., 2002; Turney & Pocknee, 2005; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2006; Atkinson et al., 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Blomberg et al., 2011; Gothberg et al., 2013). However, online focus group constructs are loosely normalized among researchers and few studies address techniques or constructs that are shown to optimize their use. While asynchronous text-based online focus groups are more prominent in more recent published literature, little consistency between group size exists. In studying a basic component of the online focus group – size of the actual group – researchers and designers can better construct their studies and environments. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between group size and focus group functions. Does group size affect depth and breadth of discussion? Are participant interactions and personal

disclosure more prevalent in a certain size of focus group? Do participants stay on task better in a certain size focus group? Do participants have anything to say about their experiences that might shed light on focus group size? Finally, how does group size affect the researcher (research team) and her/his goals? These questions

Findings and discussion

Given the review of the extant literature combined with the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses, several conclusions can be drawn. The following sections examine the relationship between group size and depth, breadth, adherence to topic, disclosure of sensitive information, interactions, participant reactions, and researcher observations.

Depth of discussion. Statistical analysis of word and posting counts found no significant differences existed between the three group types (small, medium, and large). Despite the group size, it appears group size did not influence the advent of some participants becoming prolific posters and wordsmiths while others only offered the most minimal of requirements to complete the task. This consistency of range between individual postings throughout all groups requires a deeper look into what that might imply for researchers. A small group may only have 1-2 prolific posters while having 1-2 who lag behind in effort. That would leave the small group with 1-2 participants who fall somewhere in between – or are more average in their responses. In the medium group, 2-3 prolific posters and another 2-3 on the low end results in 4-6 average posting participants. With an average word count of 1,150 words per participant (mean of all participants, n=84), the difference in data gathered would be between 3,000 and 5,000

words by selecting a medium group size (n=10) over a small group (n=5). Depth of discussion, therefore, is better when groups are larger.

Continuing the comparison, statistical analysis shows little difference between averages of individual averages between all groups. So, increasing from 10 participants (medium) to 15 or more (large) results in 5,000 to 6,000 more words for discussants and the moderator to manage. To put that into perspective, the online word calculator located at <http://www.wordstopages.com> indicates 6,000 words written in 12-point Times New Roman font would result in 15.1 pages of single-spaced (1-inch margins) pages of text.

Breadth of discussion. In this study, breadth of discussion was measured by counting the list of unique items from a brainstorming session in Day 2. Ideas generated by the group discussion were given a value that each member of the group received, as it was a group task. Breadth of discussion (ideas) was found to have a statistical difference between groups, with the small group generating a score of 6.29 ideas, medium 11.28, and large groups 12.0 ideas. It is easy to see the breadth of discussion increased nearly two-fold between the small group the two larger groups. This indicates the smaller group size is inferior in generating breadth of discussion. Meanwhile, the medium and large groups differ in their statistical significance, but not in practical significance. Again, looking back to the depth of discussion findings, we see that adding at least five participants results in at least 6,000 more words to the discussion. Yet, the amount of data that needs to be combed over for an average of less than one more idea generated does

not return enough for the researcher to consider the workload of adding further participants.

Retention and attrition. Another area where statistical significance was discovered came in the area of retention rates of participants. The drop out (attrition) in typical face-to-face focus groups is often reported as 20-25 percent or more and only the small treatment group suffered a higher incidence (31.3 percent attrition). Again, a statistically significant difference was found between medium (12.2 percent attrition) and large (17.1 percent attrition) groups. With respect to the face-to-face retention rates, both the medium and large groups would be considered to have suffered an acceptable amount of retention. Of importance to researchers in designing studies using online asynchronous text-based focus groups is the amount of participants necessary for recruitment. For instance, if a focus group of 15 participants is desired, statistics show at least 18 people would need to be recruited to result in the final desired group size. If a group size of 10 were desired, only 11 or 12 people need be recruited.

In terms of practical application, if a researcher was able to recruit 20-22 participants, it may be better to run two medium-sized focus groups rather than one large focus group as one or two more participants would tend to be retained.

Participant interaction. There was no statistical difference between the groups with relation to participants interacting with each other. In the Day 4 discussion, participants in each of the groups often told of reading the question posed by the moderator, crafting a response, and then reading other previously posted responses. With this common thread running through each of the focus group treatments, interaction

counts and interaction scores tended to remain similar. However, in the larger groups there were more other people for participants to interact *with*. This, in itself, kept the discussions more "alive" in the medium and large groups.

Adherence to topic. Literature reflecting upon adherence to topic in online asynchronous discussion often speaks of the high rate of participants staying on-task. In this study, nearly every post from every participant was on-task. No statistical variation occurred between the groups. The nature of the asynchronous discussion adds to the level of adherence to topic. Questions are posted and participants write up a response. The delay in message transfer allows time for participants to give thought and care to stay on topic. This study reified previous studies that show online asynchronous focus groups tend to stay on topic no matter the size.

Disclosure of sensitive information. Disclosure of personal or sensitive information is considered important for participants to develop bonds and make connections to one another. There was no significant difference in disclosure of personal information found between the groups. In this study, participants remained anonymous to each other so disclosure of any personal information would have to come from the participants themselves. Again, group size had little to no effect on how much participants would disclose information.

Participant reactions. Qualitative analysis of participant reactions resulted in two significant findings: (1) small group participants found their group to be too small for interaction, and (2) large group participants were taxed by the amount of reading and posting accumulated by a larger amount of discussants. Medium group participants had

minimal negative reactions to their discussion and often wrote of positive interactions without mention of higher workload.

Researcher observations. Researcher notes compiled during the discussion and notes taken during the data analysis process indicate the larger the group, the more difficult the work. Whether inputting data, sending out correspondences, dealing with technical assistance, moderating, reading and responding to posts, coding for analysis, or entering statistical data, the amount of time increases significantly for researchers as group size increases. Frustration over the lack of interaction in the small groups was also noted, and should be taken into consideration.

Overall findings*:* The optimal size for an online asynchronous text-based focus group discussion is a medium-sized group of 10-13 participants. Small groups are too small for effective interaction, a wide breadth of discussion, and suffer too much attrition. Large groups (15 or larger) are more taxing on participants and researchers, yet do not result in greater gains. . Findings are depicted in Table 9.

Table 9

Comparison of Components by Size for Optimal Effects

	Small	Medium	Large
Depth		*	*
Breadth		*	*
Retention		*	
Interaction		*	*
Adherence	*	*	*
Disclosure	*	*	*
Participants		*	
Researcher		*	

* = *optimal yield*

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study to take into consideration when interpreting the results. These limitations include non-symmetrical amounts of focus groups per treatment, the low number of participants in each treatment size, how the researcher was situated, and the use of a mixed-method framework created from a synthesis of previous similar, but not parallel studies.

First, there were three different treatments of focus group size. The size of each group varied by recruitment success and attrition rates. For instance, the small and medium focus groups were not uniform in size. Small focus groups came in sizes of 4, 5, and 5 participants and medium groups were 10, 13 and 13. Additionally, there were three each of the small group and medium groups, but only two large groups. Due to the

constraints of this study (only four workshops to recruit from), 84 participants completed the focus group discussions.

` Next, as with all qualitative studies, the role of the researcher must be carefully identified. I acted the role of researcher, web designer, recruiter, moderator, and technical support person. Different elements of my identity played a role in this dissertation study. As a professional instructional and web designer I understood the need for aesthetics as well as usefulness in an attempt to merge design and user experience. I crafted a line of questioning and interacted with respondents in a manner that reflected my current employment as a research fellow at a major university and delves into skills developed in a previous history as a professional newspaper journalist. As a former high school teacher, I had familiarity with participants, all of whom from the K-12 education field. I had previous experience moderating or co-moderating over 40 previous online focus group discussions and taught both online and blended undergraduate and graduate level college course at the university level.

Finally, while the methods used in this study were carefully crafted and specifically informed by a synthesis of previous similar studies, no true framework existed in relation to the research questions. Previous studies looking at online discussions were used, but many of those constructs were created to look at online asynchronous class discussions, so were modified for content analysis of online focus group discussion. It is hoped that by triangulating the data in a mixed-methods inquiry that the effects of unique design were minimized, but can not yet be construed as devoid of any deviation in validity and reliability.

Implications for future research

A wide swath of implications and possible future research studies emerged from the results and limitations found in this study. With group size better determined, several other key areas of online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions can be examined and are outlined here.

Moderator. The role of the moderator is an important factor in any focus group, face-to-face or online. Assessing various aspects of moderating online focus groups would be helpful in establishing best practices and procedures.

Moderator level of interaction. One area of study that needs further study is the amount of moderator interaction. Is it better for a moderator to interact with participants often or to allow the discussion to flow more organically between participants? This issues has been debated between contemporary focus group methodologists in face-to-face discussions, with some arguing for minimal moderator interaction (Morgan, 1997) and others keying on the importance of a skilled moderator guiding the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Moderator persona. The online environment differs from face-to-face interactions in that persona can be controlled by the researcher. For instance, a photo of the moderator could be included in discussions, allowing participants to see the researcher's personal appearance, including age group, gender, and race/ethnicity. True or full names could or could not be included in the moderator persona as well as personal information about the moderator. A non-descript avatar could also give the moderator a level of anonymity and could be used as a variable for study.

Participants. Many areas of research could be conducted in respect to subjects and the factors that would figure into their level or efficacy of participation. Gender, age, race/ethnicity, and computer proficiency are different areas participants could be studied. Additionally, the use of avatars, anonymity, and/or level of disclosure of persona are ripe for analysis. The participants in this study were educators, but another area of research would be to see if there are certain topics or professions that work well in online focus group discussions.

Online design considerations. Given knowledge of the optimal size for online focus groups, another area researchers could study is the design of the online environment. This study was conducted using a Moodle content management system, which was password protected. For example, is a social network system such as Facebook, BuddyPress or Ning more optimal? In this study, discussions were threaded. Another design possibility to research is the effect of daily or per-post email to participants to inform them of activity in the discussion.

Question and post constructs. Lacking in current research are information relating to the number of questions, number of questions per day, the number of days the focus group is deployed, posting time requirements, and desired response time. Previous studies where online focus groups have been used have taken place in a range of a few days to several months. This study required participants to respond within a 24 hour time period with select questions released daily. Other studies have released all questions at one time and asked respondents to post and interact by a due date. These are areas which require further study.

Group effects. Lastly, group discussion effects could be studied online using a framework similar to the one developed here. For instance, Larson (2010) describes a theory called the Köhler Effect, which posits that if the weakest participant in a group improves, the overall performance of the group improves. Comparative studies could be used to see if the person with the smallest word count and fewest participation interactions is higher in one size group vs. another size group. This might show differentiation from one treatment is better than the other.

Conclusion

The findings of a medium-sized group as optimal can lead researchers down the road to multiple implications and future studies. It is my hope that this dissertation serves a purpose to the qualitative research community as a whole and added a deeper level of understanding of online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions.

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Appendix A

Participant Registration Form

B_____ D_____ Evaluation Discussion Sign-up

This form is the registration for individuals who are interested in participating in online focus group discussions. By signing up on this form, you are agreeing to follow the rules of conduct in the discussions as well as consenting to the terms as listed.

This information will also be used to contact you to receive the incentive for participating in the study.* Required

1. First name *
2. Last name *
3. Email address *
4. Mailing address *
5. City *
6. State *
7. Zip code *

Participant Demographic Information

This part of the form is to be filled out by participants in James Hatten's focus group discussion and evaluation. This information is for data analysis and overall demographic purposes only. Individual responses will not be shared with school districts or the University of Minnesota.

8. Gender *
Mark only one oval.
- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Transgender
- ○ Other: _____

9. Age *
Mark only one oval.
- ○ 29 or younger
- ○ 30-39
- ○ 40-49
- ○ 50-59
- ○ 60-69
- ○ 70 or older

10. Race/Ethnicity *

Please select one of the following (options are based on 1997 standards for race and ethnicity by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget)

Mark only one oval.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Latino or Hispanic
- White (non-Hispanic)
- Other

11. School district *

Mark only one oval.

- B_____ C_____
- C_____ H_____
- E_____ P_____
- E_____
- H_____
- M_____
- R_____
- R_____
- S_____-N_____
- S_____P_____
- W_____
- Other

12. Job title/Role * _____

13. Years working in education * _____

How long have you worked in an educational setting?

14. Have you attended a B_____ D_____ workshop in the past? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other:_____

15. My employer required me to attend this B_____ D_____ workshop: *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, I was required to attend
- No, I chose this session
- Other: _____

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Day 1
(REACTIONS AND WHETHER NEEDS WERE MET BY THE WORKSHOP)

Question 1: What were your thoughts at the end of the B____ D_____ workshop?

Question 2: To what extent and in what ways did this workshop meet your needs?

Question 3: To what extent did you learn something new; something you didn't already know?

Day 2
(STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE WORKSHOP)

Question 4: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop?

Question 5: What could _____, your district, or your school do after (or before) the workshop to make B____ D_____'s intentions more productive and lasting?

Day 3
(OPPORTUNITIES MISSED OR CAPTURED)

Question 6: Overall, was this B_____ D_____ workshop a valuable use of your time?

Question 7: To what extent are you able to use what you learned from this class?

Day 4
(EVALUATION OF THE DISCUSSION; DISCUSSION ABOUT THE ONLINE FORMAT FOR THE RESEARCHER'S DISSERTATION)

Question 8: Considering this online focus group format, to what extent did the online comments of others influence your discussion? After reading what others wrote, did you change your mind about anything or was there a shift or evolution of your thinking?

Question 9: Please complete this brief online survey (include the hyperlink to the survey)

Appendix C

Focus Group Post-Discussion Survey

Thank you for participating in this online discussion. Your feedback and time is greatly appreciated. Please complete this brief survey regarding your experiences in our online focus group discussion:
* Required

1. In terms of the discussion group you participated in, do you feel the group size for effective discussion was: *
Mark only one oval.
- Too small
- About right
- Too large

2. Total over the four days, about how much time did you spend in responding to these online questions and reading other responses? * _____
Example: 4:03 (4 hours, 3 minutes)

3. Did you have adequate opportunity to express yourself? *
Mark only one oval.
- Not at all
- To a slight extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a great extent

4. How engaged or how involved did you feel you were in your online discussion? *
Mark only one oval.
- Not at all
- To a slight extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a great extent

5. To what extent do you feel you and others in your online discussion were truthful and honest in their responses? *
Mark only one oval.
- Not at all
- To a slight extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a great extent

6. To what extent do you feel others in the group read and engaged with your responses? *
Mark only one oval.
- Not at all
- To a slight extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a great extent

7. Did it make a difference to you that your identity was confidential to the group? Why or why not? * _____

8. Would you recommend this type of online follow-up evaluation (online focus group discussion) for future workshops? *
Mark only one oval.
- Yes
- No

9. Explain why you would or wouldn't recommend this type of online follow-up evaluation for future workshops? *

10. Please give us any other comments about your experience in the online discussion format: *

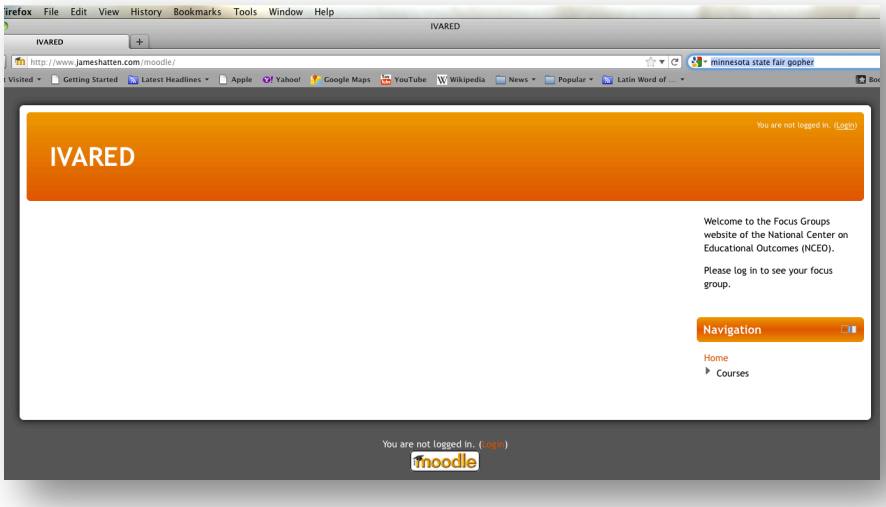
Appendix D

Printed Focus Group Tutorial

How to participate in the focus group

Step 1: Get on the moodle website

Navigate to http://www.jameshatten.com/discussion
This is similar to the screen you will see:

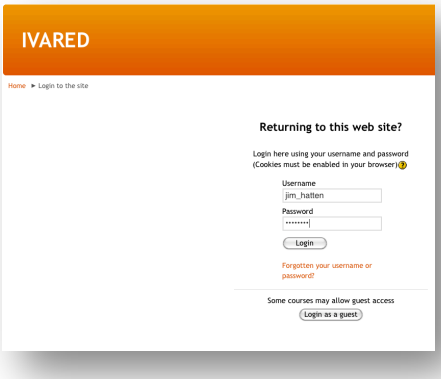


Step 2: Log in

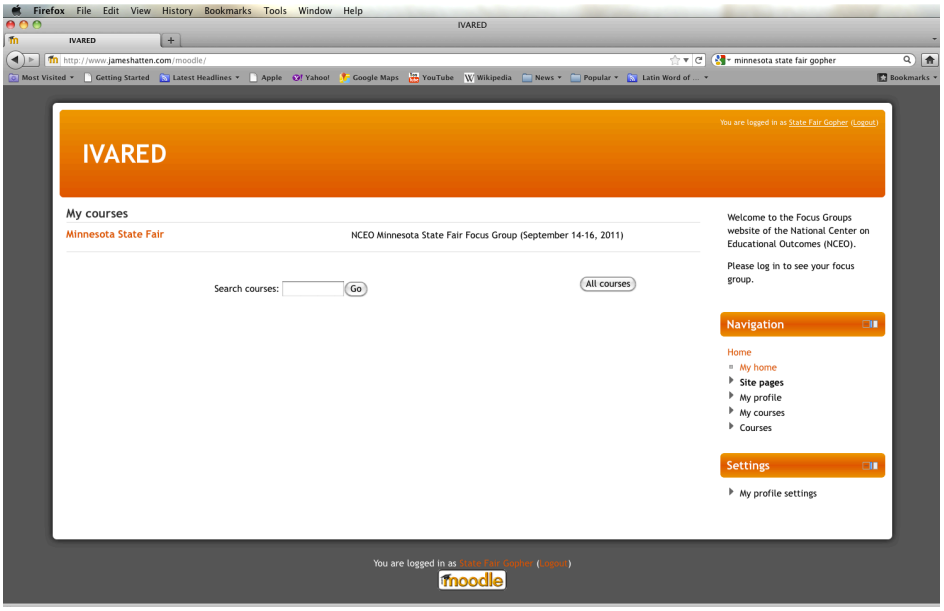
The log in is located on the upper right corner of the website. Click the Login and enter your information. Your username is your first name and last name with an underscore between it. It is all lowercase

Example: john_doe

The password is Abc1234!



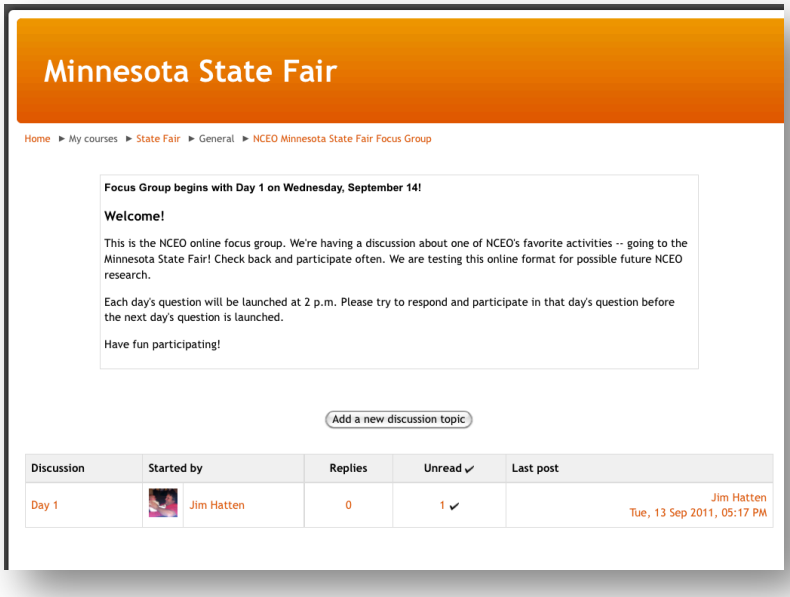
Once logged in, the site will prompt you to change your password. Make sure the new password is at least **8 characters**, has a **capital** and **lowercase** letter and one **number** and **special character** (!#$%^&*+=).



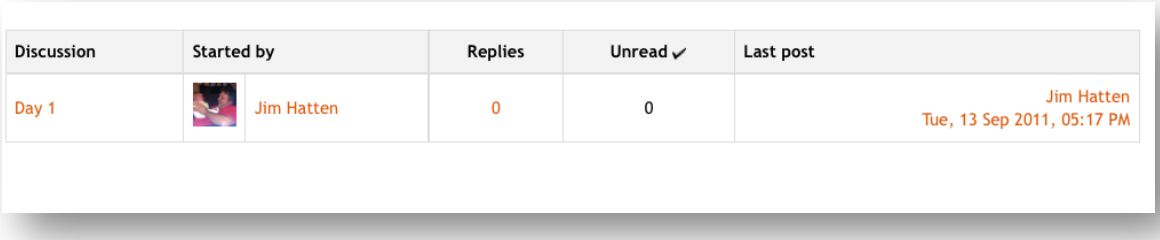
Step 3: Enter the Focus Group forum

Click on the appropriate focus group "course" (in the example case the one titled Minnesota State Fair). *You shouldn't see any of the other focus groups listed here, but if you do you only want the group you've been assigned to*.

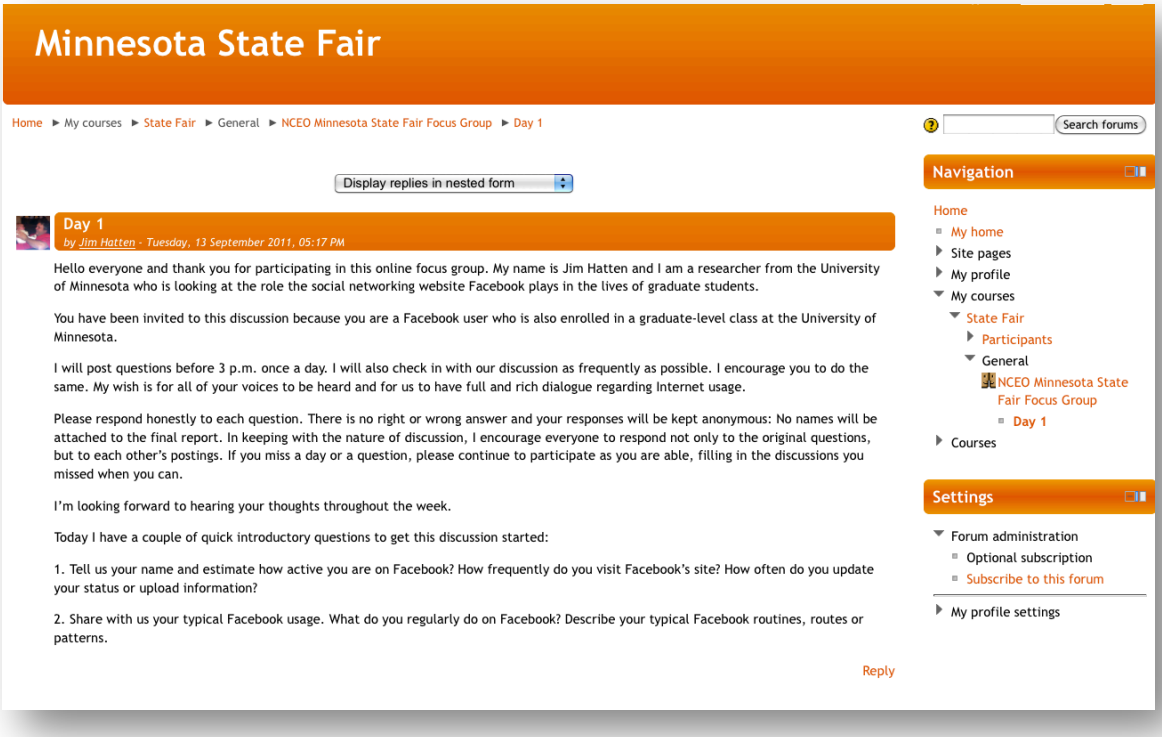
Click it once more and you're in!



Step 4: Click on the appropriate day for the discussion



Step 5: Read the forum instructions

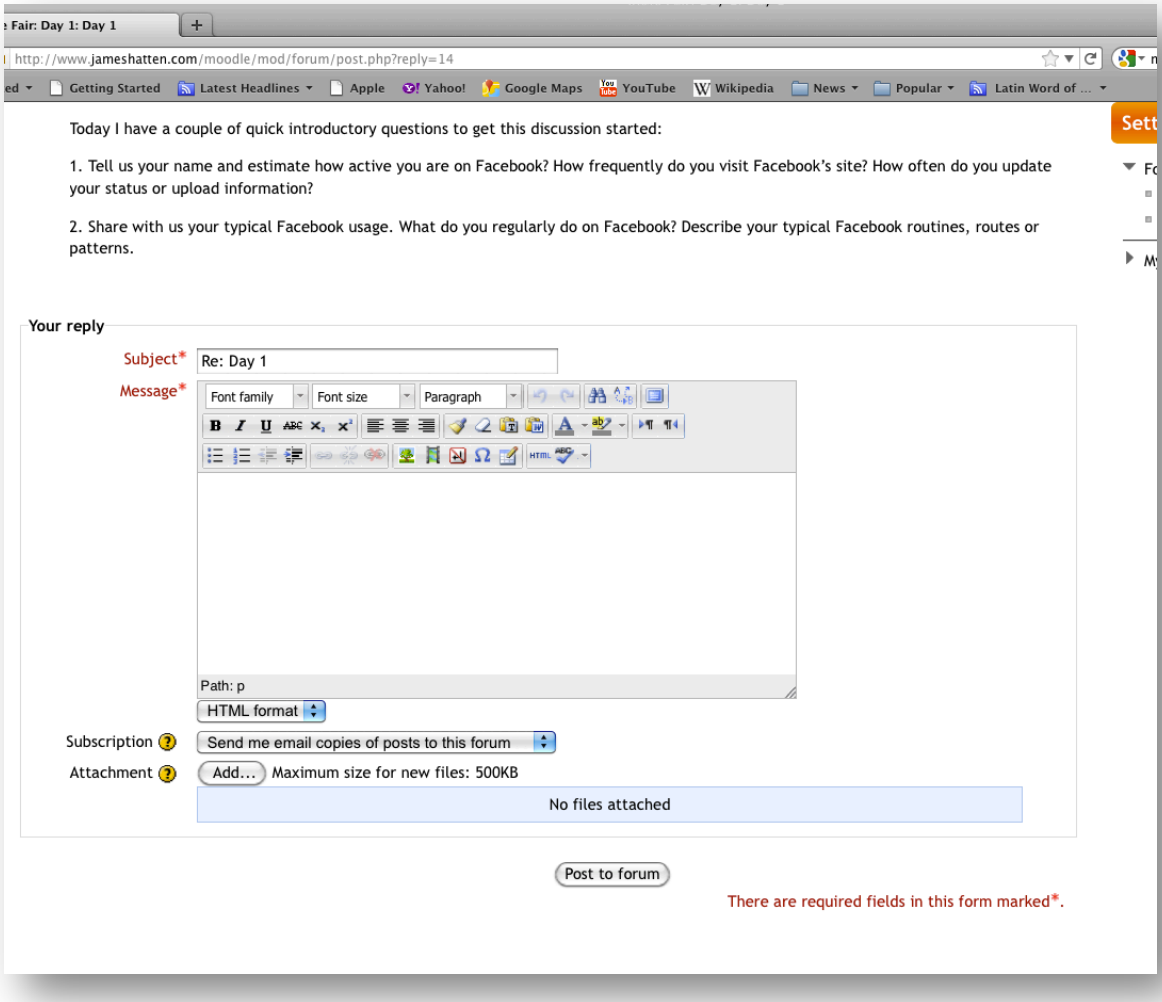


Step 6: Reply

To participate in the discussion you can reply to either the main posting or to following responses. The responses will nest like an outline would. To respond to the Day 1 prompt, click the small "Reply" link following the moderator's post.

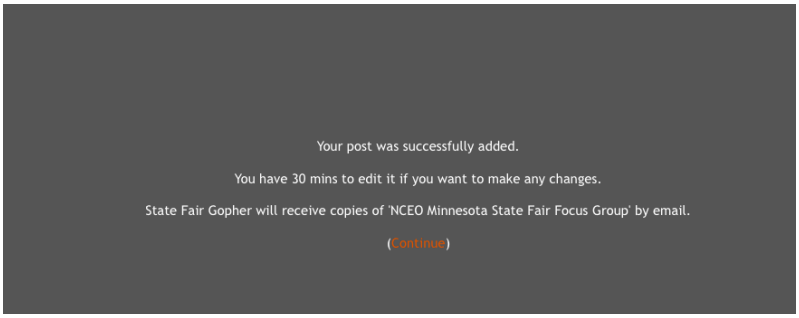
(Note: if you feel you may step away from the computer before "posting" be aware that the system will automatically log you out in 30 minutes … because of this, for longer responses, you may want to type it out in Microsoft Word or a similar program and paste it in the comment box).

You will see this prompt:



Fill out the message form and click the button that says "Post to Forum"

You will briefly see this prompt, which tells you that you have a half hour to make any changes to the message you just posted. The message is posted, but if you want to add or change something, you still have another 30 minutes to fix it.



Step 7: Once completed, log out

Read through all the prompts and check back often to see if there are additions to the conversation.

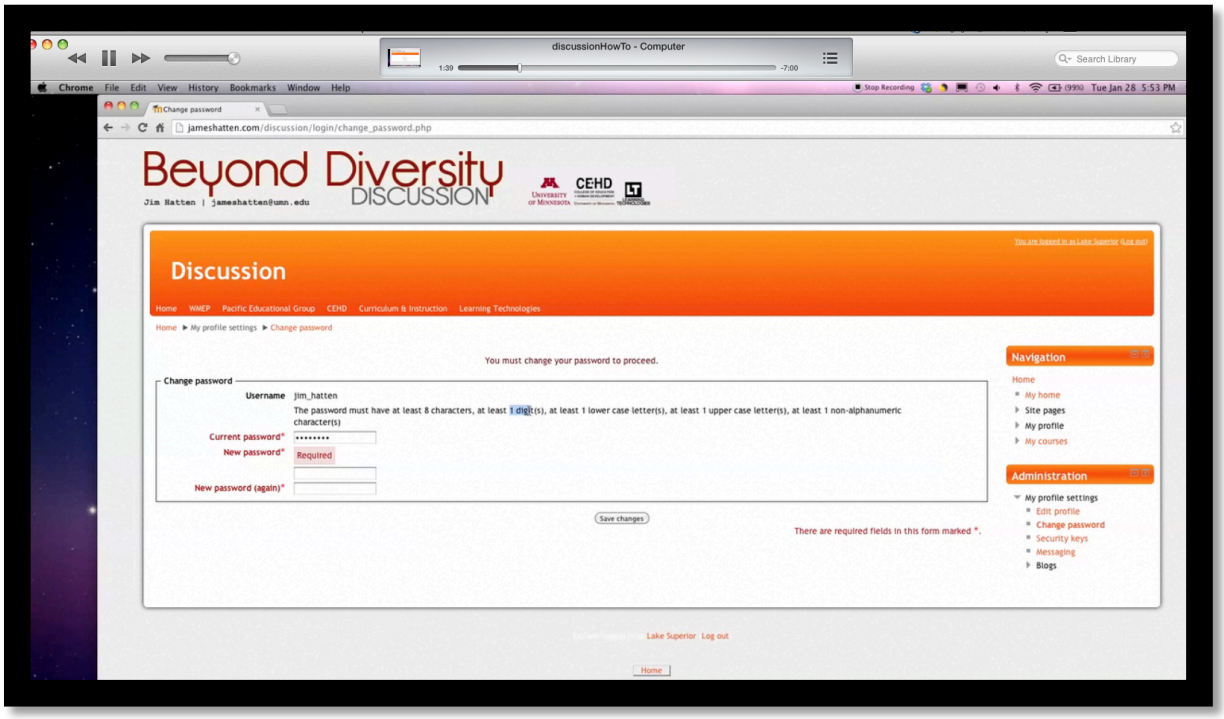
You may wish to stay signed in or want to log out. If you log out, simply click the Logout word in the upper right corner.

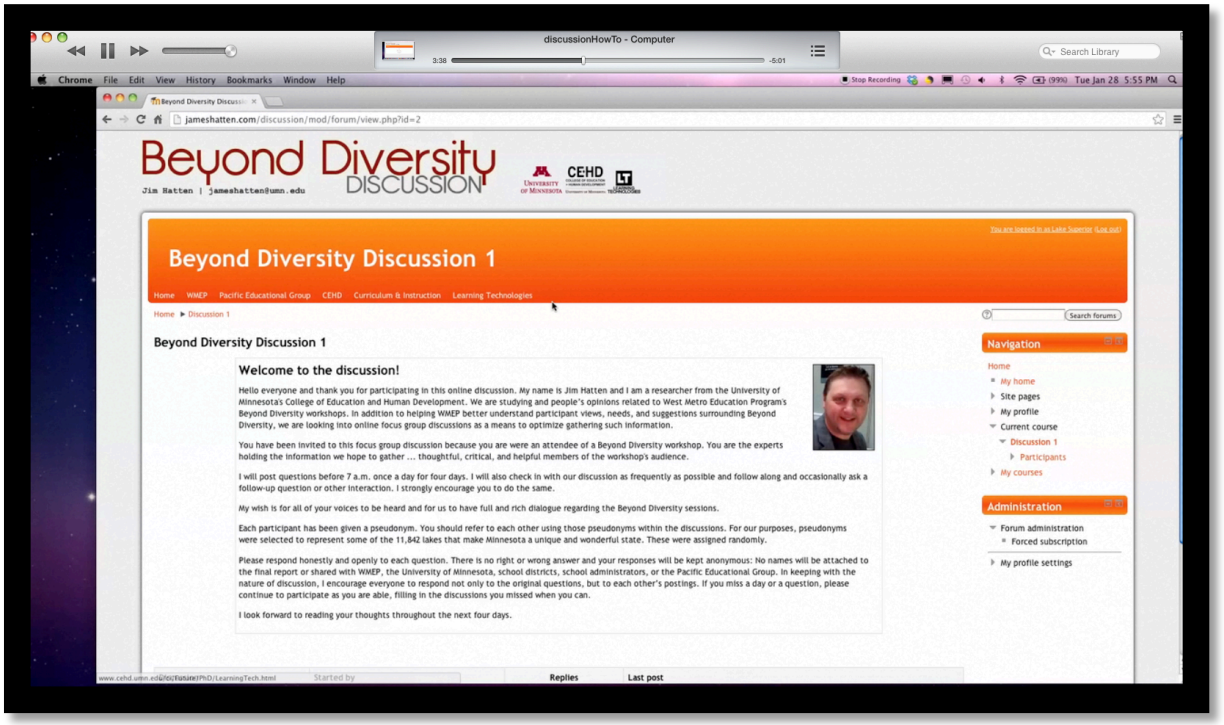
Questions or clarifications?

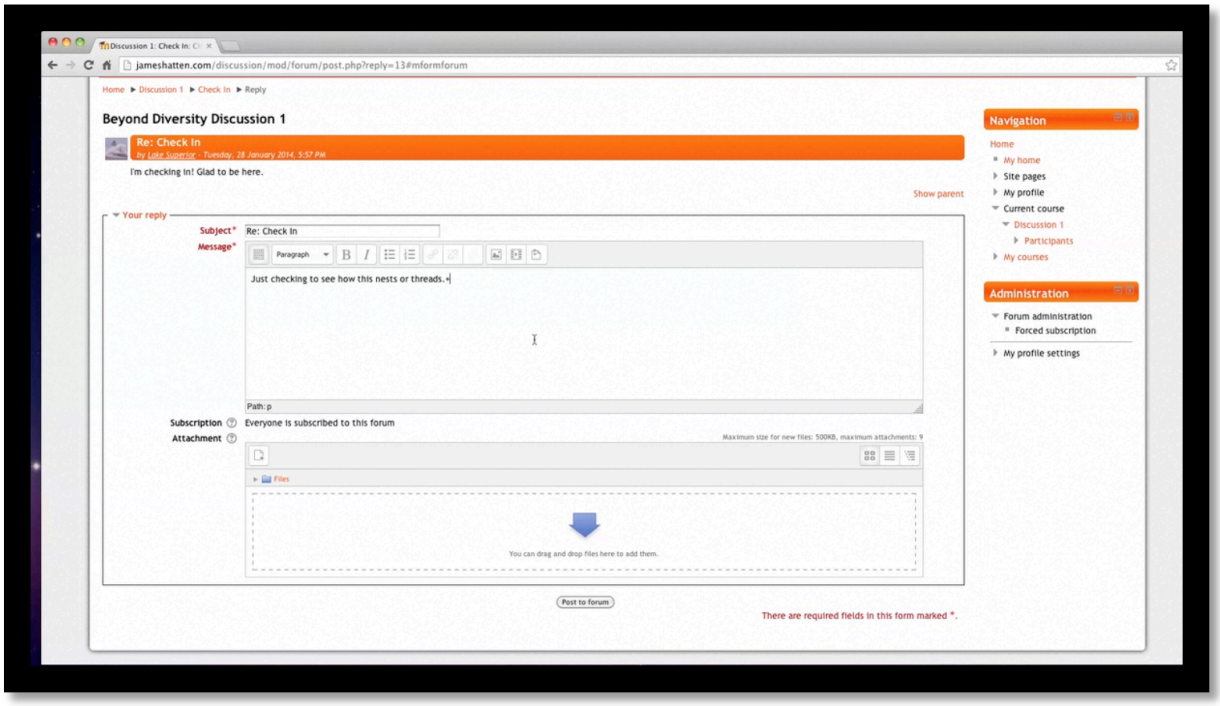
- Email Jim Hatten at jameshatten@umn.edu

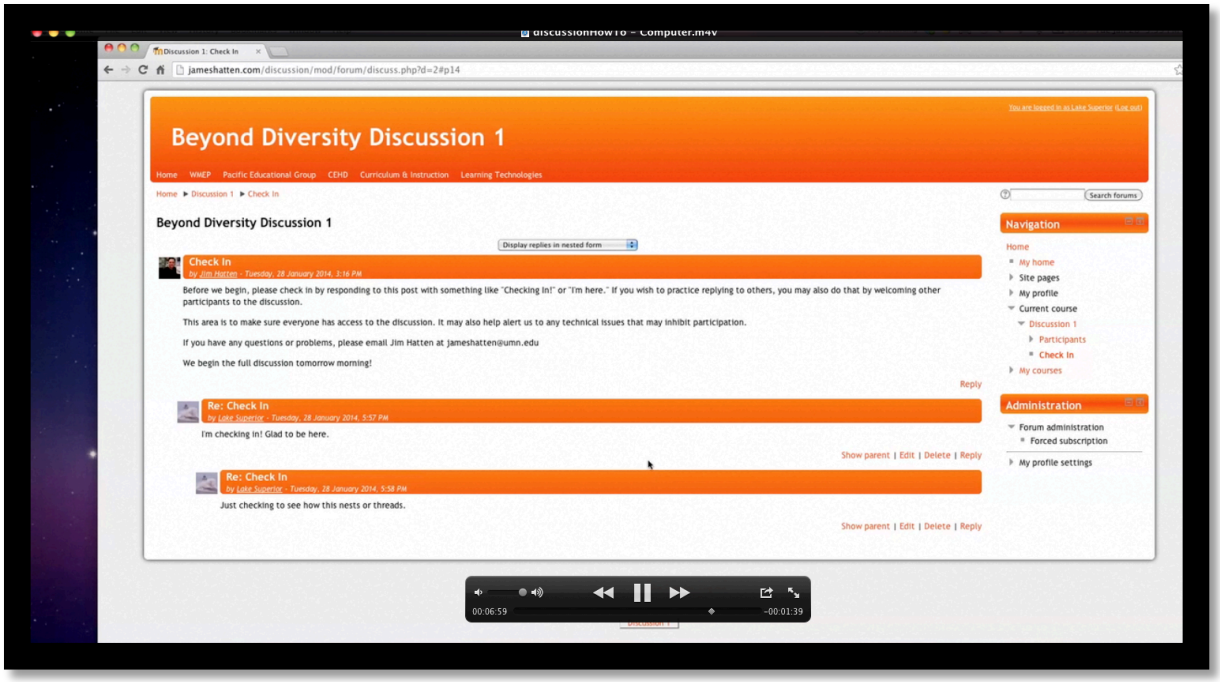
Appendix E

Screenshots of Video Tutorial






jameshatten.com/discussion/mod/forum/post.php?reply=13#mformforum
Beyond Diversity Discussion 1
Re: Check In
I'm checking in! Glad to be here.
Show parent
Your reply
Subject*
Re: Check In
Message*
Just checking to see how this nests or threads.
Path: p
Subscription
Everyone is subscribed to this forum
Attachment
You can drag and drop files here to add them.
Post to forum
There are required fields in this form marked *.
Navigation
Home
My home
Site pages
My profile
Current course
Discussion 1
Participants
My courses
Administration
Forum administration
Forced subscription
My profile settings


jameshatten.com/discussion/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=2#p14
Beyond Diversity Discussion 1
Home
WMEP
Pacific Educational Group
CEHD
Curriculum & Instruction
Learning Technologies
Beyond Diversity Discussion 1
Check In
Before we begin, please check in by responding to this post with something like "Checking In!" or "I'm here." If you wish to practice replying to others, you may also do that by welcoming other participants to the discussion.
This area is to make sure everyone has access to the discussion. It may also help alert us to any technical issues that may inhibit participation.
If you have any questions or problems, please email Jim Hatten at jameshatten@umn.edu
We begin the full discussion tomorrow morning!
Reply
Re: Check In
I'm checking in! Glad to be here.
Show parent | Edit | Delete | Reply
Re: Check In
Just checking to see how this nests or threads.
Show parent | Edit | Delete | Reply
00:06:59
-00:01:39
Navigation
Administration
Forum administration
Forced subscription
My profile settings

Appendix F

Focus Groups Final Report

1 Executive Summary

"This workshop did a nice job of meeting my needs for the school environment that I work in, but also everyday life."[Group 6]

Overview of findings

The nearly unanimous feeling of attendees was positive toward B_____ D_____. This quick overview breaks down the report's findings into three main parts:

1. Overall impact and positive reactions to B_____ D_____
2. Negative reactions to B_____ D_____
3. Suggestions for improvement of B_____ D_____

* * *

Positive reactions

Participants expressed high praises for specific aspects of the workshop and the impact it had on their professional and personal lives.

Overall impact of B_____ D_____

- Enjoyed the workshop
- Found it to be a worthwhile use of time
- Felt it would, or has already, directly influenced teaching and learning practices
- The workshop influenced attendees personally and in profound ways

Pedagogical pieces are memorable and effective

- An activity called the Color Line
- Discussion of dominant structures, specifically the concept of left- vs. right-handedness as an example of privilege and power
- Definitions and vocabulary:
    - Race, Ethnicity, Culture, Nationality
    - Whiteness
    - Institutional racism
- What it really means to be colorblind
- A closer look at SAT/ACT data and college admission
- Above the line and below the line teaching as explained through a Rosa Parks activity
- Courageous Conversations protocol (6 conditions, 4 agreements, compass)

The chance to collaborate with colleagues and educators from other districts

P_____ _____ _____ facilitator was knowledgeable, skilled and credible

Use of Courageous Conversations protocol used often in focus group discussions

* * *

Negative reactions

While the majority of responses spoke in favor of B_____ D_____, some participants reacted negatively to pieces of the workshop or identified weaknesses they felt existed. These include:

Lack of concrete strategies or tools

- Few or no examples given to put the work to practice in direct instruction/classroom settings
- Frustration with feeling overwhelmed by the content and wanting answers or solutions to racial inequity issues but none were delivered
- Workshop only scratched the surface and needs to go deeper into topics
- Too many loose ends; participants asked to accept "non-closure"

Race too prevalent in the workshop while other marginalized groups not addressed

Some content too overdone or excessive

- Color line
- B_____ D_____ protocol and conditions

* * *

Suggestions

Additionally, participants offered a wealth of suggestions to improve or better increase the efficacy of B_____ D_____ outcomes. These suggestions were directed toward W_____, individual schools or districts, and in relation to the curriculum and activities within the workshop and include:

- Follow-up seminar(s), debriefing, discussion, or other collaboration
- Adding an online professional development opportunity as follow-up: a post-workshop online discussion, online collaborative environment, or online resource library
- Changing the number of days or hours the workshop entails
- Each district requiring all staff attend B_____ D_____ at some point
- All staff members from a school attend a workshop together
- Should be used as a prerequisite for all other W_____ professional development offerings
- W_____ should offer a certificate program in racial equity or social justice with B_____ D_____ as the introductory piece
- Workshop size should be limited to smaller groups
- More interaction and moving around to other tables during the workshop

2 Background

W_____ _____ _____ _____ (W_____) is one of three integration school districts in Minnesota. It is a voluntary consortium of 11 urban and suburban public school districts in the Minneapolis metropolitan area. Consortia districts are B_____ _____, C_____ _____, E_____ _____, E_____, H_____, M_____, R_____, R_____, S_____ _____ _____ _____, S_____ _____, W_____, and W_____ itself.

W_____ offers a variety of professional development opportunities to staff of consortia school districts. According to the W_____ website, the adult learning vision for W_____'s Cultural Collaborative Professional Development Series is to "promote strategies and the necessary system transformation to eliminate racial predictability in student achievement and provide authentic engagement with students and families of ALL races." One of the mainstays of the Cultural Collaborative offerings is a two-day workshop titled *B_____ D_____: Introduction to Courageous Conversation and a Foundation for Deinstitutionalizing Racism and Eliminating Racial Achievement Disparities.* W_____ held nine (9) B_____ D_____ workshops in the 2013-2014 school year with an average attendance of 68 people per workshop.

Attendees receive 14 continuing education units (CEUs), which can be used toward renewal of state education licensing. According to its website, P_____ _____ _____ (), the organization that delivers B_____ D_____, was founded in 1992 by G.S. created a protocol for "effectively engaging, sustaining and deepening interracial dialogue … helping educators address persistent racial disparities intentionally, explicitly, and comprehensively." This protocol, called *Courageous Conversations*, "serves as the essential strategy for school systems and other educational organizations to address racial disparities through safe, authentic, and effective cross-racial dialogue." The B_____ D_____ workshops examined in this report were delivered by -trained facilitators in banquet facilities at Adath Jeshurun Congregation synagogue of M_____. Sessions began at 8:30 a.m. and run until 3:30 p.m. for two consecutive weekdays.

I (James Hatten) approached W_____ Superintendent D.J. and W_____ Coordinator of Adult Learning J.S. with a proposal to conduct doctoral dissertation research in an area they felt would benefit W_____. My Ph.D. studies at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) are in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction (emphasis on Learning Technologies). In recent years I have conducted extensive qualitative research and systemic evaluations using online environments. To date, I have conducted close to 70 online focus group discussions, surveys, interviews, Delphi studies, and other similar Internet-based data gathering

methodologies. My dissertation seeks the optimal size for online asynchronous text-based focus group discussions. In exchange for access to recruit volunteers, W_____ receives this feedback and corresponding reports at no cost. Beginning in January, 2014, I attended four consecutive B_____ D_____ workshops. This helped in recruitment as well as gave me an understanding of the content of the workshops.

Purpose of this study

Focus groups are a methodology that can be used for a variety of purposes. They can be used to help with decision making, guide product or program development, and/or to provide insight on organizational concerns and issues (such as customer satisfaction, organizational development, understanding employee concerns, planning and goal setting, as a needs assessment, for quality movements, and in policymaking and pilot testing).

In this case, the objectives of the focus groups were:

- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of B_____ D_____ professional development workshop
- Reactions to workshop curriculum, content, practices, and activities
- Generate ideas to make B_____ D_____ more productive and lasting for future attendees

I conducted eight online focus groups. All participants either attended a B_____ D_____ workshop I attended or had attended one in the past. Participants had a variety of job titles.

The study consisted of:

- One focus group with teachers who had previously attended a B_____ D_____
- Two focus groups from the January 29-30 workshop
- Two focus groups from the February 25-26 workshop
- One focus group from the March 12-13 workshop
- Two focus groups from the April 10-11 workshop

Focus groups took place in a modified Moodle learning management system (LMS), hosted on professional servers under the URL http://www.jameshatten.com/discussion. Discussions ran Mondays through Thursdays in the week following the B_____ D_____ session.

A total of 84 people completed the focus groups. Each group discussion lasted four days with a new question being posted each day in the Moodle's forum. Participants were each assigned unique pseudonyms and avatars that kept their identity anonymous to other discussants. The Moodle site was password protected and participants could only see the discussion in which they were registered.

The participation represented approximately 31 percent of workshop attendees. Each participant received three (3) additional CEUs from W_____ and had their name entered into a drawing for a free Amazon Kindle e-reader. A total of 18 Kindles were given away in a random drawing of participants following completion of the last focus groups. Kindles were purchased by the researcher.

One day after discussions concluded, user passwords were rendered useless and the discussion taken offline. Transcripts were downloaded into Microsoft Word, cleaned up for font and style, then analyzed using QSR International NVivo 10 qualitative research software. A separate researcher independently analyzed transcripts in an effort to reduce researcher bias and increase reliability.

The study generated large amounts of rich data. Participants wrote 96,474 words, which amounted to over 200 single-spaced pages of data (Times New Roman font, 12 point, 1-inch margins).

All names or any identifying comments have been removed from this report. This was assured to volunteers signing up for the study in an effort to have them speak freely and express their true feelings.

3 Findings

"I learned that it is important to help all our children feel a sense of self worth and worthiness so that they can navigate the world with confidence, if we are going to close the achievement gap." [Focus Group 7, Day 3]

FINDING 1: B_____ D_____ is meaningful and effective

- Enjoyed the workshop
- Found it to be a worthwhile use of time
- Felt it would, or has already, directly influenced teaching and learning practices
- The workshop influenced attendees personally and in profound ways

Representative examples from discussions include the following excerpts:

"B_____ D_____ was a great use of my time. It has really helped me become the person that I am today. I also see the impact on my children and spouse. The impact on my students at school is oftentimes so subtle that I might not see it. The impact may hit those students as they go away to college." [Group 1-3 (Focus Group 1, Day 3)]

"I think the workshop was a valuable use of my time. But I think it helped me more as a human being than directly with my students. I feel like it brought me a few much-needed steps further in understanding the effects of race in our culture. In the long run, and with enough others making those steps, that will probably help with the achievement gap, but in the short run, it's mostly helping me." [Group 3-3]

"I think some of the things I learned I will use every day. I have students of color in my classes, and being reminded that their world looks different from mine and from white students has put a spotlight on that for me." [Group 5-3]

"I learned that it is important to help all our children feel a sense of self worth and worthiness so that they can navigate the world with confidence, if we are going to close the achievement gap." [Group 7-1]

"Strengths included showing us different perspectives, changing our perspectives, challenging us." [Group 3-2]

"I think over time I will begin to realize how the workshop changed me. As educators we know reflecting on our learning is so very important to the learning process. These conversations are very helpful with the reflection process. [Group 6-3]

"I am very glad that I went because it changed my life." [Group 1-1]

"My thoughts at the end of the workshop were of awe. I couldn't believe all the things I hadn't thought about as a white woman and white privilege. It's made me more aware of things and I'm grateful that I was able to take part in the workshop. I also wondered when it will change for people of color and I'm willing to put in the effort toward change but at times it feels like a huge task. I felt awakened." [Group 7-1]

"I think that race is the best starting point for these discussions because it is so heavily connected to privilege. Once folks are solid in their understanding of race, racism and white privilege then it makes sense to consider intersections with sexism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, religious oppression, etc." [Group 4-1]

"Looking back all I can see are strengths. The agenda was clear, the handouts were helpful and I still have them to this day. I think that when I start to think about weaknesses I end up diminishing the value of the experience." [Group 1-2]

"One big strength of the workshop was that we had so much time to reflect and just talk about feelings, emotions and experiences. I appreciated that the seminar was lead by someone who was extremely qualified, honest, and respectful in regard to the topic at hand. I think the materials and resources that were given to us were helpful in guiding the discussion. I left with a list of books that I want to read! I always like having that." [Group 3-2]

FINDING 2: Pedagogical pieces are memorable and thought-provoking

- An activity called the Color Line
- Discussion of dominant structures, specifically the concept of left- vs. right-handedness as an example of privilege and power
- Definitions and vocabulary:
    - Race, Ethnicity, Culture, Nationality
    - Whiteness
    - Institutional racism
- What it really means to be colorblind
- A closer look at SAT/ACT data and college admission

- Above the line and below the line teaching as explained through a Rosa Parks activity
- Courageous Conversations protocol (6 conditions, 4 agreements, compass)

Representative quotes from discussions include the following:

"As a White female, I found the workshop very insightful and eye-opening, especially about White Privilege. I had never really taken the time time to sit down and think about how white privilege affects others as much as it really does." [Group 6-2]

"Strengths were the race line, activities, conversation compass, talking with your group about experiences...especially from group members who were people of color or have their own children of color. I know that it was a great workshop because I was a little nervous about a 2 full day workshop dragging on but each day flew by. I left wanting more which is a great sign of a productive workshop." [Group 7-2]

"Prior to attending B_____ D_____, I had heard of white privilege, but had a very superficial understanding of its social impact. The color line solidified my understanding of white privilege. The image of nearly 100 people, organized from lightest (whitest) to darkest based on their individual results from the white privilege survey, will probably stay with me forever." [Group 1-1]

"The color line was pretty emotional. The visual image of who is and is not affected by race daily was powerful." [Group 5-1]

"This workshop met my needs more than anticipated or expected. The race line will be imprinted on me forever. We all have degrees, we have supportive families and jobs and yet still the races were so clearly defined. As a white woman I have always known that because of my race I have been privileged but had always said well I've worked hard for where I am today and was born white. I rarely/ clearly look deeper at what I haven't had to ever deal with or go through daily." [Group 7-1]

"The strength of the workshop is that it provided the research, activities, and processing time necessary for me to move to a new level in my racial awakening and understanding of larger systems of oppression. The color line as many had mentioned previously was a moment that provided irrefutable evidence of the power and harm of systemic racism. The workshop is powerful because instead of band-aid strategies that are designed to improve student engagement, this 2 day seminar uncovers the systemic issues that are the cause and contributors to much of the inequity within our classrooms. So, in order to be

educators who do not do harm, we have to see how our racial narratives and lenses impact the way we teach our curriculum and our students." [Group 1-2]

"In addition to significant reflection, the 4 agreements and 6 conditions represent invaluable new learning that I can apply throughout my life, in inter- and intra-racial conversations about race." [Group 7-1]

"I think the examples used like the right/left hand made it relevant. Being white privileged, I could not fully understand how someone from the non-dominant side would feel. This really opened my eyes." [Group 6-2]

"I really felt the strengths of the workshop were the tools given to us as participants. I thought the compass was very helpful in guiding our responses as well as allowing us to dig deep into our own emotional responses. I also thought the 4 agreements helped guide my own focus. Especially the "staying engaged" one. The continued reminder really did help to keep me engaged." [Group 8-2]

"I appreciated the Above the Line and Below the Line example. At our district level meetings, we have been discussing only hearing and/or being presented a "single story" in classroom settings. The Rosa Parks example was indicative of how much research truly needs to be done in order to hear the Below the Line perspective. I'm wondering about the publishers of such text and where the responsibility lies in them understanding this; we will continue to create these perspectives if we don't work hard and harder to offer up the multiple perspectives." [Group 6-1]

"I think that I will always remember how we discussed Rosa Parks and mentioned above the line and below the line facts about her and her important day. I know that I have been one of those people that mentioned to my students the mainstream information that we have about her and this made me feel the need do more and provide more/better information." [Group 6-3]

FINDING 3: collaboration with fellow educators is valuable

"Strengths, I loved meeting with other educators from around the metro. Especially I loved the sincere sharing that went on without the facilitators." [Group 4-2]

"I think the biggest strength of the entire experience is the interaction between participants. Not only are the individual and group discussions highly valuable, but the whole group share sessions are very helpful. I don't know if some people would surmise that the whole group voluntary shares went on too long, but to me, they were way more

valuable than anything else. To hear the perspectives, or the truths of others, was great." [Group 4-2]

"Amazing to hear multiple perspectives/experiences. Interacting with others in the group. Challenged me to push through my own lens to see dominant vs dominant and how it relates to the way I instruct, communicate and evaluate my students in the classroom." [Group 5-2]

While the majority of responses spoke in favor of B_____ D_____, some participants reacted negatively to the workshop, found overwhelming, or identified weaknesses they felt existed, including:

FINDING 4: Concern over lack of concrete strategies or tools

- Few examples given to put the work to practice in direct instruction/classroom settings
- Frustration: wanting quick solutions to racial inequity issues but feeling none were delivered
- Feelings of being overwhelmed and not knowing what to do with the knowledge
- Workshop only scratched the surface and needs to go deeper into topics
- Too many loose ends; participants asked to accept "non-closure"

"My thoughts at the end of the workshop were mixed. Frustration - what was the point? To make us aware that people of color are still treated badly by others? Sadness - that people of color are still being treated badly by others. Confusion - what can I do about it?" [Group 3-1]

"I was wanting the class to be over. I was feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. I want answers and I want to fix the problem. I realize there is not one solution and it will take time, but I want it fix NOW." [Group 6-1]

"I wish there was a workshop that worked on specific situations that are occurring in schools and helped to brainstorm immediate actions that teachers could partake in to solve those inequities. Maybe this is wishful thinking! But I feel that coming up with concrete actions to perform, even something small, would be much more productive than discussing and listening for 14 hours." [Group 2-1]

FINDING 5: Race too prevalent in the workshop over other marginalized groups

"I walked away feeling like we had good discussions but also feeling like I've been hearing the same thing for years on this topic. I understand that race is a huge part of

diversity, but I feel that it is always focused on (causing a bigger gap) and we never talk about gender or sexuality or religion and things like that. I would love to learn more about those topics and how to approach issues in the classroom based upon those topics and not ALWAYS focusing on racial diversity." [Group 4-1]

FINDING 6: Lack of relevant information

- Color line
- Not addressing feelings of guilt by White attendees
- Didn't learn any new information

"I felt that the color line exercise was manipulative, and designed to 'bring up emotions' in a way that felt 'over the line'. I think we are all adults, and don't really need to have our emotions toyed with in this way. Also what exactly did the line prove? It does not to my knowledge, have any research that links it to the achievement gap. It shows that we all wear our color all day, which we knew. What that means to all of us, really came to reality for me when people at our table shared their experiences. We need ideas how to move this forward, not spend time being manipulated." [Group 4-1]

"there was no new information for me. I took a course on this in grad school (recently) that was able to go further in depth. I feel like almost everything the speaker quoted and the packet materials (other than the compass and other "tools") were all taken from materials I've read in entirety." [Group 3-1]

4 Suggested Improvements

Participants offered a wealth of suggestions to improve or better increase the efficacy of B_____ D_____ outcomes. These suggestions were directed toward W_____, individual schools or districts, and in relation to the curriculum and activities within the workshop and include:

- Follow-up seminar(s), debriefing, discussion, or other collaboration
- Adding a post-workshop online discussion, online collaborative environment, or resource library
- Expanding training to families, students, and community members
- Changing the number of days or hours the workshop entails
- Each district requiring all staff attend B_____ D_____ at some point
- All staff members from a school attend a workshop together
- Should be used as a prerequisite for all other W_____ professional development offerings
- W_____ should offer a certificate program in racial equity or social justice with B_____ D_____ as the introductory piece
- Workshop size should be limited to smaller groups
- More interaction and moving around to other tables during the workshop

Follow-up is needed

The following comments represent sentiments pertaining to a need for follow-up after B_____ D_____. Not only was this a recurring theme in every focus group, but when it was brought up by a participant it triggered further conversation and almost unanimous agreement and organic brainstorming for possible options to fill that need. The following are numerous representations of the perceived need for follow-up on the district or school level:

"I agree with the idea of Districts hosting followup sessions and getting back to making sure all staff have had the training. You can't make a building level change or District level change without proper training." [Group 3-2]

"I would also like to see "check-in" points along the year at a whole school community level to see how B_____ D_____ helped or what needs more work, etc." [Group 3-2]

"Our own district should hold a forum for those that attended the workshop to come together to start the work/share/discussion, etc." [Group 2-2]

“Anything our school could do after the workshop as follow-up with participants would be better than what it is doing know, which is nothing. Perhaps a debrief (that is paid by the school) with participants who attended; it could be a time we come together as colleagues and discuss what we have to do to go "B_____ D_____" in our building.” [Group 1-2]

“I think follow-up as been poor both from W_____ and also from my own district. W_____ offers this great two professional development and then what. My own district has done a poor job with this also. We send people to BD and they come back and rarely is there every any follow-up. We don't pull people together after attending to do any additional follow-up or training on what they learned and how it will changed their practices. As a result we have people who can check the box that they attended but nothing has changed in their leadership, teaching practices or how they interact with students of color.” [Group 1-2]

“I would love an opportunity to come together with district staff who've done BD at least once to further the discussion. We could create action plans and hold each other accountable for continuing our examination of privilege. My coworkers and I plan to do this amongst ourselves, but it's so easy to get busy and put things like personal growth on the shelf. Something more formal would be a reminder.” [Group 4-2]

“For the last few days I've been thinking about how, in our schools, we could follow up with a training such as this. In my opinion, it would be silly to think that in just two days, we would learn enough information about race, colorism, white privilege and others' lived experiences to go back to our work settings and change the system. I'm not being a pessimist because I believe the "system" can be changed, but it will take more than a 2-day training to do it. Some people were still absorbing the information while others were just beginning to unpack white privilege and what it means for those who have it and those who don't.” [Group 4-2]

“More follow up and revisit time so that we can take the "high" that you get after a workshop and REALLY use it in our classrooms and with our colleagues. Time to meet with other people who went to different meetings.” [Group 6-2]

“Follow up is needed. It is very easy to get back into the busy routines and not change anything. Change can happen individually so one teacher can make a difference. The conversation needs to continue. Maybe only 1 or even 1/2 day sessions to keep the conversation going.” [Group 6-2]

"I think my district should have a meeting where the principals, superintendent and district office staff have the opportunity to meet for an hour with the participants of all the B_____ D_____ 2 day trainings to more fully incorporate learned and valued information from the workshop as it can work and grow new opportunities for discussion and collaboration with administration hearing directly form staff what they see as avenues for growth in respecting students, valuing what diversity can truly mean in many forms and align with the mission statement to make it a living document." [Group 7-2]

"I would like to organize an ongoing BD support group in my district with (1) regular opportunities to meet -- perhaps a couple of time slots per month so people who work different schedules could show up when it works best for them; (2) share how we're using what we got from the workshop, including work with colleagues, families and students; (3) commit to enhancing and deepening our Racial Autobiographies (maybe with a format like Moodle, where we could choose to share portions of it); (4)led by someone like Jim Hatten or from our district (I'd be willing to try if we couldn't get anyone else, but I think it would be better for someone who's been trained to lead); (5) in private, confidential meeting space provided by the district." [Group 7-2]

"I also wonder if this is a training that could have a follow up after a year that reminds people of what they have learned and how to use the tools again. I know that many people in my district took the training a number of years ago. I am not sure how much they remember or currently use the information in their day-to-day work. I understand that the training they were part of may be very different than what we experienced. I would also hope that after a number of years there might be new challenges to tackle instead of the same issues we are dealing with today." [Group 7-2]

"It would be nice then if after the workshop, those who have attended the workshop (same session or different) could then further continue the conversation (those that have the desire of course). I know for me, it stirred up some questions and gave me the desire to act. Yet if the conversation stops or is done with journey partners that are outside of your district, that doesn't help you make a direct impact at your school/site." [Group 7-2]

"If staff are unable to all take this at the same time (obviously impossible), then specific follow-up trainings (visits FROM the trainers to the buildings OR trained building reps) to carry on the conversations and get everyone on the same page is so important! I wish everyone in the world could take this training. At the very least, and most critical point we need to be aware is in our schools -- if we could have everyone in our schools be on

the same page and continue the conversations, it would be much better. Sending us off on our own with a packet isn't enough. It needs to be revisited more than once every 3 years. It also needs to tie in with our equity and diversity training in our buildings. The information and training we get sprinkled in between doesn't even scratch the surface -- we need to, as a staff, go deeper and deeper and keep the conversations going." [Group 7-2]

"I have enjoyed participating in this forum. Hearing other's ideas, similar or different than my own, has kept the topic fresh in my mind. This leads me to execute changes in my classroom. I think it would be beneficial for my school to hold a debriefing session after each staff member attends. I think it would allow the attendee to present the skills that they learned while making others who have attended that training before recall their own path while participating in the B_____ D_____ training. I think it would be incredible to see even further diversity training offered on-site within my district so that staff can work together and receive authentic professional development resources for their specific situation, not a general one." [Group 6-2]

Online discussion as a companion

The other largely universal recommendation in the focus groups was a request for an online follow-up discussion or companion discussion. Gravitating toward an online environment as a recommendation certainly could be partially attributed to participants operating in an online discussion and familiarity and proximity made it a reasonable solution. However, sentiments ran strongly for the online environment and not all possible iterations reflected the focus group environment the participants were currently involved in. For example:

"This discussion board is awesome. I think something like this as follow up would be great. Perhaps W_____ could offer a few CEUs to continue reflections on BD via a virtual discussion board after the workshop so that people can reflect on how BD has impacted their jobs and life." [Group 1-2]

"Carrying the conversation out online helped me to find access points to continue the conversation with colleagues in my building. The hardest part of any workshop is bringing it back into your work...this process will help me do that better." [Group 6-4]

"I really appreciated this online forum, possibly even got more from it than the class itself. Or maybe it just takes me time to process the "big stuff", and this forum gave me the chance to continue the discussion beyond the two days." [Group 4-4]

“I really like the idea that others have suggested which includes some sort of moderated online discussion forum. People process in their own time and, as they implement anti-racism curriculum in their classrooms, there will be questions and issues that arise. Depending on the platform, I think an online community could naturally spring from such a discussion and become a really powerful resource for educators.” [Group 1-2]

“I really loved this online focus group format and it should be a component immediately following B_____ D_____ as a way to support teachers in their equity work.” [Group 1-4]

“I thought the online discussion forum was a opportunity for me not to quickly leave the workshop and continue reflecting on what was learned.” [Group 2-4]

“I think that it would be valuable to have a follow-up discussion online with other participants like this one after each session. I think that there was a lot of information to process and a lot of reflecting to be done in such a short amount of time. It might be beneficial to allow everyone to check in on a weekly basis (or so) to share where they continue to be on the compass or what kind of actions they have taken or discussions they have had in their buildings. I know that only a few days after this workshop I am still reflecting on my "take-aways" and would like a way to hold myself accountable so that I continue to reflect and also share questions and ideas.” [Group 3-3]

“I have enjoyed processing my own thoughts and taking in the thoughts of others through this online follow up program. I was definitely influenced by others' comments on this board --- both those that agreed with me and those that disagreed with me.” [Group 4-4]

“After reading the comments, it made me want to respond to others as way to dialogue and gain a deeper understanding the topic. Another way that the online comments has been helpful is that it helped to better understand the perspective of others and how they can be so different from my own. This is great in that the more we know about others and their differences, it helps me learn and grow. It leads to more curiosity and make me want to hold dialogues with others about their different perspectives.” [Group 2-4]

“I have never participated in an online discussion before and I have found it very interesting. I looked forward to seeing the questions and also to reading what others wrote. I did have to read the questions first and then log out to think about what I wanted to say. I feel this format lends itself to people perhaps being a bit more honest in their thoughts. And it is convenient to be able to respond when you have time and also process the info.” [Group 3-4]

"Thank you for giving us a chance to reflect on our experience. I think that actually, was the benefit of this forum. Although I read the comments of others and occasionally commented on them, the real growth for me came from being able to comment and ask, and wrestle with these very tough issues. The fact that this is anonymous, allows us to ask and say things we might not say if we could be identified by others. It is secrets that can fester and cause the most trouble for people and communities so by offering this chance to say those innermost thoughts.....priceless! My learning came through and by my own writing and reflection." [Group 4-4]

"I enjoyed this forum for reflecting on the experience. The anonymity is what made it most useful, I think. I seldom share my real opinions in written evaluations, for the sometimes irrational, but sometimes very real concern that my handwriting will give me away. If someone had a negative experience, they should share that without fear." [Group 4-4]

"I liked sharing in this format. It gave me time to think about my responses, then post, then think more, and read what others had thought. This allowed me to reflect on their comments and the discussion topic throughout the day, which continued to bring awareness of race to the front of my mind - furthering me along my journey." [Group 5-4]

"I think this should be offered for every diversity training. Thank you for providing us the opportunity!!" [Group 6-4]

"I loved having the online format! I think it was very easy to navigate and it really helped me take the time to reflect on the training. It also gave me a chance to hear what other people were thinking and this added more to my reflecting as well! Often times I feel that I leave workshops overwhelmed, because I have not had the time to reflect. The online discussion was great for helping me take the time to really reflect on what I learned and to hear other people's thoughts." [Group 6-4]

"I thoroughly enjoyed this on-line forum and I think this should be a required follow-up to enhance this B_____ D_____ course." [Group 6-4]

"Maybe each participating district could have a website just for BD feedback & report-backs about how their educators are acting on the learning/experience." [Group 7-2]

"I felt the online discussions extended if not enhanced the training. Just like I learned from the others during the training this helped me get even more perspectives and some additional information. Keeping it anonymous helps those introverts express their opinions." [Group 6-4]

"This forum opportunity is a great way to continue processing all of the information." [Group 8-2]

Expanding training to families, students, and community members

"I love the idea of encouraging not just classroom teachers and administrators to attend BD (though I agree that sufficient follow-up with attendees would be crucial). Change can't happen on a systemic level unlesseveryone in the systemis involved. How amazing also if parents could take part in something like B_____ D_____. So much of the pushback my team gets from students around our racial equity work seems to stem from the dissonance between what we're teaching them and what they've been taught by their parents (or their parents' complete silence on the topic of race).I have no idea how this would work logistically, but it would be incredible, I think, to bring something like BD to the community at large. We are asking students to do work around race, racism, and whiteness that most of their parents have never done - how wonderful to bring parents into the conversation!" [Group 1-2]

"If we want everyone to be involved and take part, we need to extend the invitation to parents and community members. I kept thinking about how the seminar could have been so much more effective if more members of specific learning communities were present at the same time." [Group 3-2]

"I really do think B_____ D_____ should be required for staff and teachers in my building. I would love to even see (and I am dreaming here) but some form of B.D. for students. Let's say they get to go on a day retreat as freshman or something. Or potentially even one per year, growing in understanding and difficulty." [Group 8-3]

Changing the number of days or hours the workshop entails

"I wish we could have done even another 1/2 day to get through more of the material in the packet. I know it's very hard to leave the classroom for more than 2 days. Possibly a summer opportunity where you could get more in depth?" [Group 7-1]

"I think this workshop would have been better suited for a week long workshop or something like that. I feel like we were rushed through some of the content for the sake of saving time." [Group 8-2]

"I walked away thinking, "this workshop needs to be more than 2 days" because there were so many more conversations to be had, but the time came to an end on day 2. I also believe that a smaller group of learners (20-25) would have provided more opportunities to not only learn new information from the facilitator AND each other, but also provide time for the "so what, now what" conversation that many of us wanted to have but were unable to do so within the timeframe of the workshop." [Group 4-1]

Each district requiring <u>all staff</u> attend B_____ D_____ at some point

"One thought I had as I went through this training was "everyone should be required to take this training". Not just teachers, but seriously EVERYONE. It should be like a drivers ed class. Or at least taught this in high school." [Group 5-1]

"I wish our district made B_____ D_____ a required training. I think it would be very helpful, especially with the racially diverse students we have within our district. I think a lot of our staff would really benefit from it. I also wish that it is strongly encouraged to take for all staff in our building and not just teachers at our school. I think all of our staff could benefit from the workshop. I also think that it should be required to do a refresher course or attend the workshop every 5 years. This way all staff would be on the same page, hopefully and we could be having more courageous conversations at our PLC meetings on a more regular basis." [Group 6-2]

"Our district has had many people go through the training but it would be great if our district had everyone (including all central office staff) go through the training so we are all using a common language." [Group 4-2]

"I can't believe my district doesn't make every employee go to B_____ D_____. What are they afraid of? Losing teachers? In my opinion, if a teacher can't take a few days out of their school year to go further on their path toward racial justice, they should be shown the door." [Group 1-1]

"I think it would be awesome if B_____ D_____ were required for all district employees. I can only imagine how much more productive all other professional development and staff interactions would be if B_____ D_____ were a common experience for everyone in the district. We would all, at the very least, have some basic terminology and experience in common, which would hopefully facilitate more fruitful conversations around race in both little and big picture contexts." [Group 1-2]

"B_____ D_____ should be a requirement for all teachers to complete at all W_____ school districts. A five year window to complete it for all teachers would be great, because the issues, and perspective that this workshop can bring light to for all teachers familar and unfamiliar with relating to discussion of diversity, race, culture, social class and the ways we can innovate education to meet the demands and challenges of all students is paramount." [Group 7-2]

All staff members from a school attend a workshop together

"I feel as though the workshop could have been stronger if it was one school at a time. In that way, a building/community could really come together and focus on the issues and possible solutions. While I extremely enjoyed getting to know people from other schools, I would have loved to be in some of those conversations with colleagues." [Group 3-2]

"I think it would be very helpful to bring this presentation to the school level. I believe the messages about race that we received were very powerful and need to be heard by more people. I feel it would be a great kick off to the school year either for a whole school building or at least offered as an option for a district PD at the beginning of the year. This would provide schools common language and goals around a tough topic." [Group 8-2]

"I believe schools should have their whole buildings do this together in the summer when everyone can do it together. I feel it would be very powerful to know everyone is together learning about the same things at the same times. Doing the race line question form and doing the line within your building could be very bonding as a school." [Group 7-2]

I wish the staff at my building could have attended as a whole. I feel many could have benefitted & we would have a great foundation to begin to build on. Establishing awareness with respected colleagues personal experiences is very powerful. [Group 3-2]

I agree that having the whole school take it at once would be beneficial. Its hard for one person to stand up and make a change but with a whole school going to the training everyone would be hearing the same thing. Conversations could continue to happen throughout the year." [Group 3-2]

"It would be nice to have the additional training done at our district level to feel that they support this practice, and would like it to grow and evolve to really make a difference. Having staff make a decision to go on their own then come back and try to apply it individually does not seem like an effective way to make change." [Group 4-2]

W_____ should offer a certificate program in racial equity or social justice with B_____ D_____ as the introductory piece

"I agree that something should be done after BD. Depending on the building or district, it is possible to never discuss these issues in such an in-depth manner ever again. Our building doesn't have specific follow-up for BD but we do have ongoing conversations about equity. That being said, I think it would be awesome for W_____ to have a continum of their classes so that participants could have a "next step" after BD. I think that requiring BD is a good first step but there should be more. Perhaps even a "certificate" or some other way to acknowledge those that are working on racial equity and social justice issues. There could even be more advanced or masters classes too. I know that BD is a pre-requisite for many of their classes but I don' t know of any districts that require anything beyond those two days." [Group 1-2]

Workshop size should be limited to smaller groups

"Group size is too large to allow for true trust." [Group 4-2]

"I remember thinking the workshop was a little too big and impersonal and that it would be ideal to have smaller sessions. We did a few activities that seemed intended for a smaller space and more intimate group." [Group 1-1]

"The biggest weakness for me was the bigness of both the space and the group. There were A LOT of people there - it was just sort of a sea of faces. If I were to make one improvement to B_____ D_____ (imaging there were no barriers relating to money, time, or space) I would limit the number of people to something quite small (20? 30?) and hold it in a more intimate space." [Group 1-1]

"The size of the group can be daunting and limit participants' willingness to participate. The more productive equity sessions that I have attended have been smaller groups. I understand that the trainers are coming in from out of town and are here for a limited time, but capping the size of the group and offering more sessions might encourage more active participation from all." [Group 1-1]

"Group was too large to be safe, or the assumption that everyone came in a group they would be able to continue the conversation with. Needed more direction from the beginning about how to interact." [Group 4-2]

More interaction and moving around to other tables during the workshop

"My thoughts at the end of the day were that of wishing I had had the opportunity to meet more people in the group. The last activity with people that were in my score range

on the race line left me with a very anti-climactic feeling. I really wish that we would have had the opportunity to more around and be more outside of our comfort zone and be in the zone of disequilibrium more." [Group 7-1]

"Giving people the opportunity to move around and meet other people more often, I believe would have created more dialogue and practice in using these tools and protocols that were presented. I think that this is the next step of having these conversations within teams, within our schools and most importantly, within our districts." [Group 7-2]

"I would have liked to talk with more people. My table mates were great, but I would have liked to dialogue with more voices. I also am a high school teacher, and most of the people I interacted with through the day taught is pre-school or elementary levels. It could be cool to have at least one activity or grouping with teachers in a similar context as you, so I can talk about how sophomores or juniors respond to race. It's much different than 1st and 2nd graders. It was also a very long time to sit. As a teacher, I forget how much time I actually spend up on my feet walking around my classroom and the building." [Group 8-2]